

Library Form No. 4

This book was taken from the Library on the date last stamped. It is returnable within 15 days.

TAPA—9-3-63---10,000

MIRAGE

When Jane Radley, at nineteen, meets Dino Lewis, a poor Italian actor, they fall whole-heartedly in love. The opposition of Jane's parents, and Dino's Catholicism and lack of prospects, are trivial obstacles to be brushed aside. 'We're together; we can't lose', they assure each other. 'We're young and strong. We've got so much time, we can beat them all.'

For several years it looks as if they are right. Neither the cynicism—or is it practicality?—of her friends, Lisa and Moira, nor a miscarriage can make a dent in Jane's happiness. Dino continues to provide her with the reassurance she so badly needs. To others and themselves the Lewises exemplify marital bliss—until Dino's infidelities come home to his wife.

Jane is faced with the eternal question: how far is love compatible with compromise?

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

A Share of the World

Mirage

Andrea Newman



THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

TO TERRY

© Andrea Newman 1915

Printed and bound in Great Britain for

The Bodley Head Ltd

10 Earlham Street, London, WC2

by C. Tinling & Company Ltd, Liverpool

Set in Monotype Plantin

First published 1915

Contents

PART ONE: BEFORE

page 7

PART TWO: AFTER

page 163

Part One

Before

1

PHYLLIS BIT DEEPLY into a meringue, large teeth cracking the surface so that the cream burst out on either side between her painted lips. 'You *are* a good little thing, Jane,' she said, 'to remember what I like. But then you always were a thoughtful person, weren't you, as long as I've known you, and that's going back a few years—too many, I think sometimes.' She paused and chuckled, then, remembering, made her voice sober again. 'It's a shame. A downright shame. I've said so to everyone. You've had a raw deal, my dear.'

'Oh well,' Jane said, 'that's life,' and wondered how often in the past few weeks she had used those words. The stupid, the well-meaning, the sympathetic, all produced the same banal response.

Phyllis nodded emphatically. 'That's true. Oh, I've had my share of trouble, as well you know, but it doesn't do to let it get you down. Got to keep your chin up, I always say.'

And Dino always wanted to punch you right on it, Jane thought automatically: the safety catch was not functioning reliably as yet and his name continued to intrude. It was like ceasing to believe in God: not an empty space but a person you must remember to deny.

'Your cup's empty, Phyllis,' she said.

'So it is. Would you, my dear?' Rings flashing, she passed the cup to Jane. 'It's so refreshing.'

There was a pause while Jane poured and heard in Phyllis's silence a mechanical search for tact.

'My dear—oh, thank you so much—will it . . . take long, do you know?'

'I don't know yet,' Jane said. 'I'm seeing Fredericks tomorrow.'

'Oh yes, such a nice little man. Well, you're in good hands there, my dear. It makes such a difference, having someone you can trust.'

And for the fees he charges, Jane thought, he should be trustworthy indeed.

'You must get a good settlement, my dear,' Phyllis added between sips. 'I know how soft-hearted you are, but you mustn't let yourself be cheated.'

'If I was really soft-hearted, I wouldn't be in this position, would I?' As soon as she had spoken she felt ashamed: it was unfair to give Phyllis a question like that.

'Oh, Jane.' She frowned, shocked. 'You mustn't think like that, my dear. I mean you'll only upset yourself. Why, it was more than flesh and blood could stand, wasn't it? I mean, it was flagrant, towards the end.'

An odd word, Jane thought, almost quaint. Occasionally Phyllis used words you wouldn't have thought she knew the meaning of.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'Absolutely.' And knew what Dino would have made of this conversation.

'Men,' said Phyllis with relish, safely arrived at her favourite theme. 'They're all alike.' She licked round the edges of her mouth, but a few crumbs of meringue still clung to her lipstick, white on mauve. 'The grass is always greener over the hedge. But you try giving them a taste of their own medicine and, my word, what a fuss they make! It's sauce for the gander, not sauce for the goose, you see, that's what it is. They're all alike.'

'Cigarette?' Jane asked.

'Oh, thank you, my dear. Well, if you ask me, you're well rid of him. Caused you nothing but misery. Selfish brutes, every one of them. Think of nothing but their own pleasure.'

Why does it have to be like this? Jane wondered. Why can we not say it was wonderful but it ended? Why blacken everything, tear up every good page and stamp on the pieces? She stubbed out her own cigarette and lit another. Was it too soon to be blunt, to inquire why Phyllis had

invited herself; too early to be a reluctant hostess, develop a headache, drop a hint, scream?

'Jane.'

She heard the solemn note in the voice, making it slow, so that her name almost seemed to acquire two syllables.

'You must be wondering why I've come . . . why I particularly wanted to see you.'

No need then. Hang on; maybe not for much longer. 'I'm always glad to see you, Phyllis. Did you have a special reason for coming?'

'Well, I did. It's been such a worry to me ever since I heard, and now I'm here I don't know how to get it out.'

Jane managed a smile. 'Just say it. I won't be offended.'

'Oh, my dear, you *are* a good little thing. Now you know I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world but I simply must ask you . . .'

Now for it. The dramatic pause. 'Yes?'

'Well . . . are you going to name anyone? When the case comes up, I mean.'

'Oh. Well, yes.'

'Oh. Oh, you are.' The plump face sagged. 'Could I . . . that is, would you mind if I ask who it is?'

Jane frowned. 'Does it matter? It's no one you know; I can't see it really—'

'Oh, my dear.' Phyllis's expression was instantly transfigured. 'Oh, Janey, you can't know what a weight you've taken off my mind.'

'I'm glad,' Jane said, 'but please don't call me that.'

'What? Oh, I see. I'm sorry. Well, as I was saying, you really have relieved my mind. I've been so worried I haven't slept and I didn't know what to do until Herbert said I must come and see you and ask. He said if I didn't he would, so then I had to come because Herbert's so clumsy he might have said anything . . .' She paused, breathless, beaming.

'But what did you imagine?' Jane asked.

'What?'

‘What did you think I would do?’

It was a child’s face beneath the pancake and powder; guileless and open, it expressed a series of primary emotions so that no misunderstanding could ensue, like a teacher of mime. Perhaps this was why you held back the blow even while you yearned to deliver it. Now astonishment held the stage.

‘Why . . . Joyce, of course. I thought you were going to name Joyce.’

Jane actually laughed genuinely for the first time in months. ‘But Joyce,’ she said, ‘was so completely unimportant.’

YET AT THE time it had been the end of the world. Lying in her darkened room, curtains drawn (as if that were an analgesic), she had pieced together the fragments of letters, phone calls, party gossip. Some of it had clearly been meant to reach her, the rest probably not. When she was sure, she surrendered to masochism, picturing the body she loved with the one she loathed: Joyce, with her over-developed figure and blank face of ignorant teenage.

When Dino came in he called for her; she heard her name repeated, growing nearer (she never answered) until it was outside the door. Dino came into their bedroom.

'Hullo,' he said. 'What a good idea. I should always find you here.' He sat on the edge of the bed and kissed her hand.

She stared at him; the fact that he still looked familiar and devoted seemed part of his treachery. 'How did it go?' she asked, and the question made her a conspirator, too.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, bloody, really. It gets more swashbuckling every day. I wouldn't mind if John was a bit genuine about it, but I find it tough taking it seriously when I'm the only person on the set who does.'

They had discussed this before. He meant taking everything, even the fun and the implausibility, seriously; not cheating the public by patronizing them and descending to their level, dredging up any old third-rate or second-best; saying instead, This is escapism in the highest and we want you to enjoy it as much as we did.

'I know,' Jane said.

'John feels it's all beneath his dignity,' Dino went on. 'Well, it's not beneath mine. We both take the money and I can't see the difference. If John cares so much about his artistic integrity he should take all his money and spend it on a really worth-while picture that no one would watch and

then maybe he could look in the mirror without spitting with disgust.' He paused and screwed up his rather beautiful mouth to make a rude, despairing noise. 'And really, he is so nice underneath, as a person. I like him, Jane, you know I do. But I don't like to work with him.'

It went on for a while. John Gregory was one of Dino's favourite topics and his analysis was often worth hearing: feminine, Jane thought, in its approach. But then she wondered if this was conceit on her part. Absurd, anyway, to forget that the mental boundaries were not so precise. Now she let him talk until her silence made him suddenly wary.

'Jane, are you listening? What's the matter?'

She did not answer.

'You're ill—that's why you're lying down. Oh, I'm so thoughtless. What would you like—a drink? A doctor? Do you want me to go away? I'm tiring you . . .'

In stress, she thought, his English self receded. She told him, in as few words as possible, what had happened. He began to look trapped and furtive, and she broke off to say, 'Please be honest with me at least.' But it was a surprise to see that the emotion which finally triumphed was anger. He crashed a fist into the palm of his hand and swore with style and resource.

'Save it,' Jane said coldly, suddenly enraged herself. 'The cameras aren't rolling now.' Somehow her own prerogative of righteous indignation had been usurped.

'You think I don't mean it?' He elaborated obscenely upon the theme of Joyce and her mother.

'Phyllis is all right,' Jane said. 'Don't tell me you've slept with her, too, because I'm pretty certain she wouldn't have you. Even if that makes her unique.'

'The pig. The cow,' said Dino, his Italian exhausted. He somehow managed to make profanities out of quite innocent English words. 'I would never be so desperate to lower myself.' He lit a cigarette and Jane saw that his hands were trembling. Not the moment to feel pity for him, she

reminded herself, resenting the blend of sexuality and maternalism he aroused in her.

'But you were desperate enough for Joyce,' she said, and by hurting herself again succeeded in hardening her heart. 'I would have thought that was sinking pretty low.'

'It was. I don't deny it. That is the whole point. It was so trivial, nothing.' He spread out his hands. 'A convenience.'

'I'm not an actress,' Jane said bitterly, 'so I can't tell when you're acting. Maybe you don't know either. But you're giving a fine performance. A shade overdone, perhaps, but pretty good.'

She thought for a moment he was going to strike her and wondered, as always when they quarrelled, if they had ever really known each other.

'You've never spoken to me like that before.' He dropped his cigarette on the carpet and stamped on it. 'I've always been an actor—have you never believed a word I said? What must I do to make you believe me? I am telling you the truth. It was like wanting a drink. Must I wait always until I can drink with you? Of course it is better, what I really want. You know that. Don't you?' He leant forward, shouting at her. 'But when you're not there, what then?'

'What the hell d'you think I do?' Jane asked, terrified that she would start to cry.

'I don't know. I never ask you.'

'Well, suppose I told you.'

There was a moment's silence and she saw his thoughts instantly translated.

'Jane . . . no, you're saying that; you want to hurt me—'

For a few seconds she really enjoyed, truly and savagely, the spectacle of his pain. Then she said quietly, 'I wait for you. What did you think? Can't you do the same for me?'

Suddenly, he was calm. He sat on the bed, picked up the crushed cigarette and threw it in the grate. She let him take her hand and kiss it. The whole scene might never have occurred.

'Darling, I did try. I really did. But I'm too weak. It's the

same reason I'm a bad Catholic. I'm too weak to live up to you or God. The only people I really love.' He smiled at her and she thought, unmaliciously but as a cold fact, He knows he is going to win. I have never been as sure of anyone as he is of me. And yet this is not offensive, only part of his charm. Like a child who knows he will be forgiven because the price of not forgiving him is too high.

'Let me explain, darling, and then let us forget it.' His clear actor's face expressed disgust. 'It was a dirty episode. I am ashamed of it. But I was so angry that anything so trivial should upset you.'

Jane said, 'How was I to know it was trivial?'

'You know Joyce. Do you think Joyce could mean anything to me—or to anyone else, as far as I can see?'

Again the feminine, almost catty streak. 'You don't have to blacken her to get out of it.' She felt obscurely that this was unfair, un-English. It was odd how remorselessly basic differences emerged in a row: race, religion. The rest of the time she did not remember them.

'But it's true. I'm not exaggerating. You don't know her. She followed me everywhere, never left me alone. She said she was a virgin for me; she had refused some boy in London because of me. For days I laughed it off, but she went on and I was missing you very badly. So it happened. She swore she'd make no trouble and you'd never know.'

'How many times, Dino?'

'What?' He looked shocked.

'You'd have to tell the priest in confession, wouldn't you? Well, you're confessing to me. How many times did you make love to her?'

'Oh, Jane, it wasn't love. Not once. You know how many things it can be. Don't use our words about her.'

'I can't even use our words about her, but you—' She couldn't finish.

'But, Jane, it was nothing. Two animals. You know. We are not always loving and gentle. Sometimes it is lust for us, too.'

'But we know there is love underneath,' Jane said. 'It's never been lust and nothing else.'

'No.' He looked triumphant. 'So now do you see? That's how it was. Not part of us at all. We have always had more. Now do you see why it was so trivial?'

Jane sighed. She felt very tired. 'I suppose so.'

'Oh, darling, I am so sorry. I never meant you to be hurt. If I had gone to a prostitute you'd never have known. But I never did that.'

'You never had to, it seems.' She fought back a smile, thinking how quickly tragedy could turn to farce.

He lay down on the bed beside her. 'Can you forget about it, Jane?'

She sighed. 'Dino, that's a silly question. I haven't forgotten Magda yet—'

'But I was drunk,' he interrupted violently. 'At that party we were all drunk. I told you so.'

'I know. But you can't expect me to forget it happened. It just doesn't hurt any more. I can understand.' She paused. 'I suppose I can understand about Joyce, too.'

He said eagerly, 'It was nothing. Does it hurt less now than it did?'

'I suppose so. You're very persuasive.'

'Don't sound so resentful—as if you hate me.'

'Dino . . . have there really been only two?'

He sat up, violently jerking her head round so that he could look at her. 'Yes. I've told you. I shall kill you if you keep asking me. What do you want me to do? I can't change anything, can I?'

'Well, that's not my fault, is it?'

'Oh, you're impossible. I think you want me to kill you.'

'Well, it would be one solution, wouldn't it? Oh, Dino . . .' She began to cry and laugh, weakly, at the same moment, and when he bent to kiss her, her arms went about his neck.

'Jane, I love you,' he said eventually. 'Remember that. I love you. I'm not a perfect husband, but no one ever is. Do

you want a perfect husband ? There's more than one sin in the world, you know.'

'I know.' She shut her eyes and all the ugly pictures were floating away on dark water. 'Dino, what do we do now ?'

'We go on. Can you imagine a world without us ? It would stop spinning. We can't do that to the world, can we ? Think of the millions depending on us.'

She smiled.

'Jane, if you only remember nothing can hurt us because we're too strong. Mm ? We fought your parents and my parents and we survived being poor and being rich and working hard and not working at all. We're tough. Aren't we tough ?'

'I suppose we are,' Jane said.

3

AT THE BEGINNING, indeed, they had had to be.

'I want to marry Dino Lewis,' Jane announced to her startled parents one morning after breakfast.

She had to repeat it.

'Is he that Italian fellow you've been going around with?' her father asked.

'Half-Italian, yes. His father is English and he's lived mainly in England.'

Her father was silent.

'Darling, what does he do?' her mother asked.

'He's an out-of-work actor,' Jane said. They had agreed, she and Dino, to let it sound as bad as it might; there was no sense or hope in disguise.

'I see,' her father said. 'Presumably that's why he's not here to speak for himself.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, however conceited he may be, he obviously can't imagine he's an acceptable husband for my daughter.'

'Or anyone else's, for that matter,' her mother added, very sweetly.

'He's coming to see you,' Jane said. 'But I wanted to discuss it with you alone first. To get the insults out of the way. If any.'

'He certainly hasn't improved your manners,' said her father.

'I'm sorry,' said Jane. 'It's nerves, I think.'

'I'm not surprised. Anyone making such an idiotic suggestion would be nervous. Nervous of being locked up, I should think.'

'It does sound crazy, I know,' Jane said.

'Meaning it isn't?'

'Meaning we think it will work.'

There was a pause. Mrs Radley said gently, 'I hope you haven't misled this young man, Jane.'

Fear, that no other voice could implant, crept in like fog. 'What d'you mean?'

'Does he know you're only nineteen? That he'll have to wait two years to marry you?'

Jane let out a sigh. 'Then you won't agree. At least we know where we stand.'

'But, darling,' her mother said, 'you must have known all along.'

Her father was watching them both, but furtively, as if he had no right to be there.

'You can, of course, elope,' Mrs Radley went on. 'If you think it's worth all the effort and unpleasantness. And if you have the money.'

'Harriet, what are you trying to do?'

Jane said, 'It's all right, Daddy. We've thought of that already.'

'It's all right, Arthur,' said his wife. 'They've thought of everything. After all, they're young, aren't they?'

'And we're not going to elope,' Jane went on. 'It's irresponsible. But if you don't let us get married I shall simply live with Dino until we can.'

The colour mounted in her father's face. Her mother smiled faintly and lit a cigarette.

'And you don't call that irresponsible?' Mr Radley said finally.

'No, I don't,' said Jane. 'I call it honest. But living here and having an affair with Dino would be dishonest.'

'I never thought,' said her father heavily, 'that I'd hear my daughter talk like a streetwalker. Suppose you've picked up these ideas at that art school of yours and it's all our fault for letting you go there.'

'Oh no, Arthur,' said Mrs Radley. 'You're forgetting. You don't know what they read these days. Or what films they see. There's virtually no censorship left. Besides, they're above all the ~~rules we have~~ by. They're young.' She tapped

ash on to her plate. 'And then there's the question of heredity. One hears that it's stronger than environment. I used to dispute that. Now I think I was wrong.'

'Harriet.' Her father was using his warning voice.

'Jane knows she's adopted,' Mrs Radley said. 'We never pretended otherwise. There was no need for her to know about her mother until now. Until she began to resemble her. We adopted you privately, Jane, and we know quite a lot about your mother. Not her name, of course. And if you go to live with this man you'll be following exactly in her footsteps.'

'You hate me, don't you?' Jane said. Her eyes were very bright. 'I've disappointed you, haven't I?'

Mrs Radley looked at her thoughtfully. 'I think it's true to say,' she amended, 'that we've disappointed each other.'

'TELL ME ABOUT your mother,' Dino said. They were lying on the narrow bed in his room, dropping cigarette ash on to the congealed remains of beans on toast on the floor.

'All right,' Jane said. 'I don't mind now I feel safe. She was wonderful. All through my childhood I adored her. She was like God. Everything she did went right. She just couldn't miss. She did masses of welfare work and sat on committees and things all over the place and was a pillar of the Church and the women's institute and oh—'

'I get the picture,' said Dino, 'and it sounds revolting.'

'Oh no, it wasn't—move, you're lying on my hair—honestly, it was marvellous. She was a kind of small-scale lady of the manor and everyone knew and admired her, and because she was my mother some of the glamour rubbed off on me.'

'And you knew you were adopted?'

'Oh yes. Always. I don't even remember being told.'

'So far, so good,' said Dino, kissing her neck. 'When did the worm get in the apple?'

Jane frowned, trying to remember. 'Ten or twelve, I suppose. It's been bad and getting worse all through my teens. I turned out a misfit. I wasn't sociable and I was frightened of horses and clumsy at dancing. When I went to parties I stood in a corner and people had to be kind to me.'

'You refused to compete,' Dino said. 'Your perfect mother gave you an inferiority complex. Oh, I read my Penguin psychology with the best of them.'

'I love you,' Jane said suddenly and with passion. They kissed and Dino slipped his hand under her shirt-blouse and gently stroked the skin.

'Do you want me now?' Jane asked. 'Am I being unfair?'

'I always want you,' he said, 'but you're never unfair. I can wait. Heavens, you only moved in today. That gives us upwards of sixty years ahead, God willing.'

'Are you very religious, Dino?'

He laughed. 'What an anxious voice! Not so religious that you'll have a baby every year, darling. Or any year, for that matter, unless you want one. Though I think you'd prefer it if you took care of that.' He patted his pocket. 'These things are a little clumsy and far from romantic.'

'You're very knowledgeable.' She was silent, considering. 'I suppose I should be scared. But I just feel safe.'

'Well, so you are.'

'Go on about God. You are a Catholic, aren't you?'

'I'm supposed to be. My mother is, of course. Dad's rather against it. They don't fight, though. Anyway, I go sometimes. I'm an emotional Catholic: fervent about candles and incense and sung Mass. I always believe in God but I forget about sin and confession and—oh, all the inconvenient parts, I suppose. It sounds dreadful now I try to explain. Eventually we're going to make love and I don't believe that's a sin. Now the Church says it is. But I can't visualize the God I know agreeing with that. So I suppose I'm not a Catholic. Only I feel as if I am.'

'It doesn't matter, darling,' Jane said. 'You're just confused like all of us. In fact I'm greatly relieved to find you're not perfect after all. I was beginning to feel overawed.'

Dino laughed. 'That takes us back to your mother. I'm not sure I should let a slur on my perfection go unchallenged, but as it's your first evening here I'll be indulgent. How did she behave when you turned into an ugly duckling instead of a swan?'

Jane sighed. 'She was so tolerant I wanted to die. I used to play with the idea of suicide. I composed dozens of notes in my head, or sometimes I did it without leaving any—I could never decide which was more effective. They both worked so well. I saw her heart-broken by the grave-side,

blaming herself for driving me to it by ignoring my hidden talents and making me feel a failure. She would never recover; her whole life was blighted. And then next day there she'd be, just the same, putting a brave face on her latest disappointment. "Never mind, darling," she used to say. "You'll be good at something. We've just got to find it."

'God,' Dino breathed. 'What a bitch! I wish you'd let me talk to her.'

'I know. I handled it badly.'

'No, darling, I don't mean that. I just mean I should have seen them both and explained things. I would feel better if I had. I never wanted you to handle it alone.'

'I didn't mean to,' Jane said. 'I only thought they might say things like "wop" and "papist" and I didn't want you there if they did.'

'They're surely not that sort of people?'

'I don't know. The most unlikely people are.'

'True. But I'm not all that sensitive, darling.'

'Everyone is that sensitive.'

He sat up. 'That's most astute. Have you been deceiving me? I don't believe you're really nineteen at all. You've just moved in here to get two years' free board and lodging, not to mention sex. When I look closely I can see where you've had a face-lift. Cheap surgery.'

'Dino; I love you.'

'I know. I love you, too.'

They looked at each other solemnly.

'It's happened suddenly, hasn't it?'

'I never believed in it.'

'That awful party . . . You were so kind.'

'Not kind, bored. You were the only girl there with a real face. All the others were pretending to be someone else. Why did I have to join a profession when I despise all the people in it?'

'Not all. You haven't met all. They were a bad bunch. Small fry.'

'Any smaller and they'd disappear.'

'They weren't all awful there. You met Moira, didn't you?'

'The fat one.' Dino yawned.

'She's not really fat. And she's a good friend.'

'All fat girls are good friends,' said Dino. 'Some philosopher must have said that.'

'And Shirley.'

'An idiot. A beautiful idiot. Now, she was pretending to be at least three different people, all at once and on top of each other.'

'Then she can't be an idiot. I wouldn't know how to do that.'

'But you don't have to and she does. That's why it comes naturally to her.'

'I'm not really sure about how to be one person yet. But you're going to help me, aren't you?'

'I don't think I can. But I'm going to be there while you find out. And afterwards, to admire the result.'

Jane said soberly, 'I don't think I was a very good person when I talked to my parents. I think I made a mess of it.'

'Well,' Dino said calmly, 'if it happened just the way you said there's no doubt. You did make a mess of it.'

'I know I did. And I meant to be so different. I meant to be all adult and reasonable. Instead I got defiant and put their backs up.'

'You were all three of you horribly rude,' Dino said, 'as far as I can see.'

'You don't spare my feelings, do you?' Jane said in a small voice.

'But, darling, it's funny. I don't have to be tactful. They won't stay hurt for the rest of their lives. We can afford to wait. And we have each other. Now and later. That's the really important thing. Each other and a lifetime.'

'Will you make love to me now?' Jane asked. 'I'd like you to.'

'Are you sure?' He looked at her, lovingly but with close scrutiny. 'There's no hurry.'

'It's the right time now.' She couldn't explain.

In the half light he undressed her very gently, kissing her and talking to her between kisses. 'It's important, the first time, especially for a woman. You dream about it. But it's never the best; it can't be. It can be lovely, though, in its way. It can leave a lovely memory that you keep when all the other better times have wiped out how you felt. You're beautiful. You're doing me an honour. I won't let you down. You needn't be afraid. We've got so much time.'

When she was naked he slipped out of his clothes so quickly and easily that she was hardly aware of his undressing. They began with the pleasure she knew already, until she was almost dying, crying out, before she fell from the top and he kissed her, sighing, as if someone had given him an enormous present.

'Now?' she asked.

'Now. Or later on. We'll see.' Then presently: 'Oh, I think so, darling. Oh, I think you're ready now, aren't you? Oh Jane, I love you so much.'

At first it was easy; then a little harder; then suddenly uncomfortable; then, just as suddenly, easy again. At least, Jane thought, I have never been afraid of my own body.

Dino was still. 'So far, so good,' he said. 'You're lovely, Janey.'

'So this is it,' Jane said.

'The beginning, yes. This is where people rush and make mistakes. I could hurt you badly here.'

'I love you,' Jane said. 'And I'm so glad the first time is with you.'

'And I'm glad not to be too inexperienced for you. You don't mind that? It's in your own interests as well as mine. And you don't mind me talking? I can't keep it up but I want you with me and understanding, not frightened.' He had begun to move again. 'Don't let me hurt you. Yet, anyway. Later on, you won't mind. I hope.'

Later on, she didn't. She felt very little physical sensation: some warmth and excitement, a welcoming within her, but

she was unprepared for the orgasm of emotion which left her weeping in Dino's arms long after he had become still, even after he had slipped from her. She remembered and was grateful all her life.

He comforted and appreciated her with infinite tenderness; then they had cigarettes and talked. They switched off the light and the room might not have been stuffy, untidy and small. We've begun, Jane thought. She was too dizzy with happiness to say emotional things. They discussed technique and facts, but their feelings they expressed with movements. They had found out early that there are few, if any, words for matters of importance.

The dark room was the first of their islands where no one could harm them.

5

THEY STAYED THERE about six months. During that time they learnt a great deal about each other and the problems of sharing a single room on an inadequate income. Dino took odd jobs when possible, but a regular job might have prevented his attending any auditions or interviews his agent arranged for him. Jane started work for the first time in her life, using the shorthand and typing her parents had insisted she learn before they allowed her to go to art school. She was bored. Moreover, she regretted that her training as an artist had been so abruptly halted. She bought cheap paper for sketches and tried to work every evening when she came home. Sometimes she tore up all the paper with tears in her eyes.

‘I’m not very good, am I?’ she said to Dino.

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. ‘You’re young; you’ll improve,’ he said. ‘I’m not a very good actor, either.’

He did not, she was interested to find, feel guilty or humble about their poverty, recognizing instead that they had chosen to live like this. ‘If we want to flaunt our independence,’ he said cheerfully, ‘we must expect to be rather uncomfortable—at least for a while.’

During their six months in the room Dino did two commercials, though not the glamorous affairs Jane had hoped for, since they used mainly the back of his head as he gave the girl chocolates or seduced her with hair-cream. When the cheques came, however, Dino wanted to save them. This was a big shock to Jane, who felt that wild spending whenever possible was the natural companion to enforced economy. It seemed to her an obvious ethic of Bohemian life.

‘But this is rent money,’ Dino said heatedly. ‘How do you

think I have paid the rent all these weeks? I saved the last cheque.'

'Don't your parents give you an allowance?' Jane asked.

He looked amused. 'Oh, my mother sends a few pounds now and then. I always save it. But I don't have an allowance. My father and I agreed, after he paid for my training, that I was to be independent if I wanted to live this crazy life. There is no point, after all, in subsidized freedom, is there?'

By the time they visited Dino's parents Jane was violently curious about them. His mother she found to be rather large and affectionate, but given to disconcerting flashes of formality. His father appeared intensely English: tall, thin and bird-like, with no obvious emotional display. But when he was alone with Jane he startled her by saying, 'I'm sorry you can't share a room here, but it would upset Dino's mother.'

Jane felt embarrassingly sure that she was blushing. She could not think of anything to say.

'Of course, if she really thought about it she'd know,' Mr Lewis went on conversationally. 'But she doesn't. It's a good plan, you know, not to ask yourself a question if you're afraid of the answer. Not cowardice, just common sense.'

'But you don't mind?' Jane managed to say.

'Why should I? My son is an adult and I respect him. I don't imagine you'll have any babies till you're married; that can still be awkward, you know, even these days.'

Jane nodded.

'I think I almost envy you: you're living the teenage dream. So long as it doesn't last too long, the one-room part anyway, you can regard it with nostalgia all your lives.' He smiled. 'Of course, by rights you should be in Paris.'

Jane said, 'We're very happy. It's good of you to understand. But we are looking forward to getting married.'

Mr Lewis regarded her benevolently. 'I know you are. Sorry I can't help you there, but Dino's long past needing my consent. I don't suppose I could talk your parents round.'

'No,' said Jane. 'I don't suppose you could.'

'Daughters,' said Mr Lewis. 'It's a very different matter when you have daughters. Unfair, but there it is. Now I can afford to be tolerant. No one is going to get Dino pregnant.'

Jane smiled. It was such an idiotic picture.

'Of course, some girls become pregnant deliberately,' Mr Lewis went on, 'as a form of blackmail. How would your parents react as prospective grandparents?'

'I don't know,' Jane said, 'but I have a feeling they'd let me rot. I'd be going the way of my own mother, you see. My original mother.'

'Oh dear,' said Mr Lewis. 'Yes, I do see.' He sighed. 'What a pity people fling these taunts at each other when they're hurt. Never mind; it's not the right reason for getting married, anyway.'

The room seemed smaller after a weekend in the Lewis's house. They returned to the same pattern of life: a pile of shillings for the gas in a tin on the mantelpiece, vegetables under the sink, bread in the food cupboard beside the tinned soup, egg boxes and sausages. 'Don't you ever want Italian food?' Jane asked.

Dino laughed. 'Cooked by my mother, yes. But not cooked by me on one gas-ring.'

Coffee was their main extravagance. They consumed at least one pound of it each week and this did a sizeable injury to their budget. When they could afford it, that is to say very seldom, they went to the cinema, but this was usually a depressing experience since if the actors were better than Dino they induced despair, and if they were inferior to him they made him rage with envy and indignation. Jane found this hard to bear, as the cinema had always been her chief form of relaxation.

'But my turn will come,' Dino would say as they walked home to save the bus-fare which they then spent on cigarettes or chocolates. 'You'll see. When the kitchen sink is full of peelings and the drains are stopped up—who will bring a

fresh waft of disinfectant and romance to the jaded public but—' he produced an imitation fanfare—'Dino Lewis?'

'Who else?'

Dino executed a high-kicking leap so that the passers-by glanced at him with curiosity.

'It doesn't sound very commercial, though,' Jane added.

'What? Oh. Well, I expect they'll call me something else.'

'You bet they will.'

'Wait till I get you home. I shall beat you.'

But in bed that night, after they had made love (an experience which grew all the time more rewarding) Dino said slowly, 'Jane . . . you know, sometimes I think I shall never succeed. I feel safe now, so I can talk about it.' He held her closer, though this was scarcely possible. 'Sometimes I am so frightened. I see myself becoming middle-aged like this, joining all the thousands of other actors who were never quite good enough or lucky enough. I am twenty-five. I am trained for nothing else and for six years I have scraped along, never quite starving, but never quite getting a break. Six years, Janey. How long do you think I should give it?'

Jane said softly, 'You're not asking me, darling. You know you could never give it up.'

'Not yet, no. A young impoverished actor can be romantic—just about. But a middle-aged one—never. It is undignified.'

'But we're young,' Jane said. Sometimes she felt the power of this in her blood and bone like a potion of magic or a voice screaming an incantation. 'We're young and we're strong. We've got so much time, we can beat them all.'

'You're wonderful,' said Dino. 'I love you.'

'Don't you feel it, though?' Jane was excited; she sat up in bed and tried to see through the dark. 'Sometimes I wake up and I feel so marvellous, I walk down the street to the office or the launderette or wherever I'm going and I want to shout, "Look out, world. I'm Jane and I'm nineteen and Dino and I are in love and we're going to beat you to your knees."'

Dino laughed, a private, contented laugh. 'Now do you see why I need you ? You're my talisman. You're strong and you make me safe. How can you do it ?'

'I don't know,' Jane said. 'That's the extraordinary thing. Until I met you I couldn't do it at all, even for myself.'

IT HAD BEEN strange, during all her teens prior to meeting Dino, to be aware of her own futility. She was not even anything as dramatic as a failure; she was simply average, or slightly below: an ordinary, pleasant, moderately attractive girl, small and pale with straight brown hair, like thousands of others. She had no special gifts and unfortunately this was not good enough, for she lived in a talented household where a competitive spirit flowed as naturally as blood. Mr and Mrs Radley played bridge and whist, went riding and sailing, took motoring holidays, entertained students, performed good works, learnt foreign languages and painted pictures. Television and radio were enjoyed with discrimination for what they might contribute to domestic industry. Wandering around idly was not encouraged. But it is difficult to be continually occupied when you are not good at anything.

Jane seized on painting as one of her mother's interests that held out a strand of hope. At school she was least mediocre at art. She began to work with astonishing devotion and kept this up for several years before venturing to hint that she might like to try for art school. Her parents and her art teacher were surprised, but at least the question of her post-school training (so far embarrassingly poised over Swiss finishing establishments) was resolved. Her parents, however, insisted on a commercial course first, since her social short-comings obviously precluded early marriage, and Mrs Radley, having cast an experienced eye over Jane's paintings, could see no real artistic future for her daughter, though, as she said, she greatly admired the work the child was putting into it all. Mrs Radley's own work, mainly bleak landscapes or meaningful abstracts, was remote indeed from that produced by Jane, who drew flowers and babies and

cuddly bunnies, all in a rather childish manner, and seemed to have a basic fear of primary colours.

At school Jane was generally happy, for there is no better place in which to be mediocre. School is, in fact, not a place for the talented, if they wish to be happy—unless their talents are confined to the physical. But out of school Jane teased her brain with the question of why she was so ordinary, and with the additional problem of why she was aware of it. This, she felt in a way she could not explain, was almost a perversity on her part.

When she could get out of the house without having to give a destination for her journey, she would walk quite aimlessly and wonder whatever in her whole life she could find to do. She had no ambition in the true sense of something which gives purpose to any life, however dreary, though she enjoyed drawing and it occasionally brought her satisfaction. She had no strong feelings about anything, no opinions that could not be reversed by two seconds' argument or a casual remark of scorn: nothing, in fact, that she felt was worth contributing to any company she might find herself in. The friends she made were either undemanding people or those in search of a good listener. This she liked because it made her feel useful, and usually she found it impossible to believe that she was necessary to anyone in the world. I suppose there must be a lot of people like me, she thought sometimes. But this was not helpful, for even the mediocre long, albeit secretly, for a trace of individuality.

It was not a problem that could be taken to anyone. How could you begin to explain how you felt? A doctor would be justified in saying that you were a strong, healthy girl and should get out more, play some tennis, make new friends. The vicar would tell you to pray for guidance and maybe join the church youth club. They would both remind you of what a good home you had and how lucky you were, because, of course, there were thousands worse off than you; and in no time at all you would find yourself thinking about the starving millions and the displaced persons and the

refugees. And on top of the rest you would end by feeling guilty because you were selfish and introverted enough (this, then, was the real trouble) to want to concentrate on yourself only, for a while, and have everyone else do the same.

'AM I NEGLECTING you?' Dino looked up from his book.

'No. You've only ignored me all evening.' She kept her voice expressionless.

'And you're angry?'

A deliberate pause. Then: 'No.' She laughed. 'I'm quite happy just watching you.'

'Oh Jane.' It was the satisfied voice she loved best. 'I'm so happy with you. Now I feel we're really married.'

'You used to read all evening before we were married, too,' Jane pointed out.

'I know. But then you resented it.'

They both laughed.

'Funny symbol of marriage,' Jane said.

'It's one of many,' said Dino. 'I love them all. That ceremony didn't spoil a thing, did it?'

'Not a thing.'

'Perhaps it made things better?'

'Perhaps. Or it could be just time passing.'

Dino yawned. 'Such a lot of time, nearly a whole year. Just think how much there is to go.'

'I do. Often.'

'Doesn't it frighten you?'

'No. Why should it?'

'Sixty years with me.'

'Wonderful.'

'I'll be an old man, white-haired and cross. Or bald, maybe. Bent double with a stick.'

'Never.'

'It could happen.'

'It won't. I shall make you do exercises. Besides, I'll be old too. A little shrivelled old lady. We can sit in our rocking-chairs on either side of the fireplace and mumble at each

other as our false teeth work loose.' He made a face. Jane said, 'Sorry, I forgot. You don't like teeth, do you?'

'Not false ones. Not since my traumatic experience. People should be very careful with these things.'

Jane giggled. 'Well, maybe we'll keep our teeth. The rest of us may rot, but our teeth will linger on, white and perfect.'

'That's better.'

'Well, what will we talk about in our perfectly clear voices when we're old?'

'Oh, I expect we'll play "Do you remember?"'

'We do that already.'

'I know, but we make plans too. When we're old, we'll have all the plans to remember.'

'The ones that worked,' Jane said, teasing.

'They'll all work.' He looked at her confidently. 'We're together; we can't lose. You've taught me that.'

'I'm glad.'

'I see us—' he half-closed his eyes—'a very rich old couple, beloved and respected, I the most famous actor in England, you the most beautiful wife. Our children will adore us and speak proudly about us. We shall be haunted by our besotted grandchildren. We shall have perfect memories and tell our life story on television.'

'Oh Dino, really. It sounds awfully hectic.'

'So it is. But we shall be a healthy old couple, too. And if all this is too much for our aged hearts we can always collapse and die on the same day.'

'The timing is important,' she said seriously.

'Yes, I know.'

'Whatever would I do without you? I couldn't go on.'

'You'll never find out, darling. I'm sorry, but there it is. Now come over here. Why do you let me waste half the evening on a book? You should nag me like a proper wife.'

'But I'm a mistress,' Jane said, delighted. 'I have to please.'

HER FIRST PREGNANCY was not undertaken lightly. Dino had never undervalued security, but when the first film led to a contract even his exacting standards were satisfied. They were living at the time in a pleasant three-roomed flat which had succeeded the one where they had stayed for a while after the wedding. In a way, Jane had expected more setbacks: their progress from room to house via flats seemed too steady and smooth. At one time it had seemed as though they would stay in one room for ever, yet, to look back on, it was a brief period in their lives.

The solidity of a contract meant that a house was possible. Dino was immensely enthusiastic and Jane could think of no real reason against it, though she tried.

'Why a house in the country? Why not in London?'

'Oh, London's no good for children,' said Dino.

'It didn't hurt either of us.'

'I know. But our children must have better.'

'Won't you be too far from work?'

'Oh no, we have the car. I might even be nearer, if we choose carefully. It all depends.'

He was so keen she could bear to say no more. She scarcely admitted her reluctance to herself, but occasionally she feared that his intuition where she was concerned might guess it. She covered up carefully and assumed that his views on the general nature of women provided a further screen.

She did not dare to tell anyone. While they were looking at properties together, she looked at babies alone. Most of them were ugly. She tried to picture a child like Dino, attractive and dark-haired, and her heart warmed a little. But who could tell? It might look like her.

Visiting Moira, she began to observe the children

minutely. They were noisy and demanding. There was the occasional tug at the emotions when they smiled up at her, angelic in the bath, or suddenly asked, 'Can I hug you, Mummy?' and flung their arms round Moira, but most of the time they fought and cried and spilt their food. The girl was older and bossed the little boy, who whined for sympathy. The games they played split the ear-drums. They were apt to bring in disconcerting treasures from the garden and place them trustfully in your hand. But mainly they were time-consuming. Moira's day began early with children and ended late with Patrick. The children absorbed about twelve hours a day. When Jane visited Moira she was always busy: preparing, eating, cleaning, washing, mending, ironing, playing. She occasionally lost her temper, but on the whole she seemed extraordinarily patient, Jane thought. When she mentioned this, Moira denied it.

'I'm not. Karen's always saying, "Why are you cross, Mummy?" I'm awful. But I don't think it really matters so long as you love them and they know it.'

Moira had lost her figure, but it had never been very good and this did not happen to everyone. Besides, there were exercises. Jane stripped and studied herself in the mirror. She was too thin; quite well-proportioned but thin. It would never get out; it was impossible. Crazy to put in something so small and take out something so large. Somehow it was no comfort to know that other people managed it. She looked at her hips and shuddered disbelievingly. In the street she studied women of her own build pushing prams. They looked normal. They had done it. They could chat to their friends about food and money, and forget the whole thing. Had they ever felt like this?

Reading medical books provided no reassurance. They were too technical and impersonal. It was not that she could not understand them, but they might as well have been incomprehensible for all the good they did. She could not picture herself as *the woman*. It was all too remote, nothing at all to do with her body.

She asked Moira, 'Does it hurt?' and saw, as with a sinking heart she had feared, a look of vagueness spread over Moira's face.

'Mm . . . well, some of it does. You forget, you know. It was a bit rough with Karen; I had to have a Caesar in the end, as you know. But Paul was fine.'

'It didn't hurt?'

'Oh, a bit, of course. I'd been dreading the delivery, but that was marvellous. The labour got me down rather, but just as you think you can't take any more you don't have to. It was lovely to know when he was born—especially after missing out on Karen. Such a sense of achievement.'

Casual words; it was no good. 'A bit rough . . . got me down rather . . .' No one could help you. You had to face it for yourself. Would it change you? When this thing had happened to your body would you be transformed? Transfigured with mother-love, repulsed by sex, sore, reluctant, preoccupied, frigid? Would it be you and the child against your husband, or he and the child against you? Could you survive as a unit and accommodate the child into the fabric of your life?

She caught sight of her face in shop windows as she walked about. I'm immature, she thought, staring. Immature. Whether she was or not, it didn't help. She could not, for the first time, talk to Dino and have him say, 'Oh well, of course if you feel like that, of course we won't. I wouldn't dream . . .' He had a true Italian love of children and presumably imagined that any woman would share it.

Jane looked tenderly at her contraceptive, thinking that for her it symbolized the security of marriage as much as her wedding ring. They were both circular, too. She realized that it was possible to deceive Dino, for she had experimented, using her cap during a period, when he did not normally expect her to do so. He had not noticed and once he had even commented on how pleasant it was psychologically to do without it, although physically it made no difference. But of course deceit was out of the question.

They bought their house, eventually deciding on the village in Surrey where Patrick and Moira lived. They had fun choosing furniture, carpets and curtains. But the time had come; delay would have been suspicious. She made one joke on the subject: 'Can you smell anything? It's my boats burning.' But she said it too gaily and Dino merely added, 'Our boats,' and drew her into his arms. She thought it might be tense and strange, but it was not; there was an even greater tenderness and the usual overwhelming sense of unity. Perhaps she even wallowed a little in her sense of self-immolation.

She became pregnant easily.

AFTER THE MISCARRIAGE her mother came to see her. In her room at the nursing home Jane never forgot the sight of her mother laden with a quantity of flowers that from anyone else could have been called vulgar.

'Darling, how are you ?' her mother asked, and she looked anxious and pale.

'I'm fine,' Jane said. Then her heart betrayed her and she added, 'It's nice to see you.'

Mrs Radley deposited the flowers, sat down and took her daughter's hand in both her own. 'I've been so worried,' she said. 'I thought if you died and I never had a chance to say—well, you know what I mean.' She smiled, hopelessly, as if to say, I want to apologize but I can't.

'Yes, I know,' Jane said. She felt weak and hoped she would not break down. All thoughts of revenge she had once cherished now deserted her.

Her mother was fidgeting: stroking Jane's hand, turning it over, looking at it, then staring through the window into the spring sunshine. She's actually nervous, Jane thought. My mother is nervous. I've never seen this before. But she felt no triumph, only an embarrassed tenderness.

'You see, I really do know how you feel,' Mrs Radley went on at last. 'There's nothing to compare with this: the disappointment, the sense of waste, of loss.' Her voice trembled. 'After all the hoping, the waiting. No man can possibly understand.'

But Dino has been wonderful, Jane thought. And it was for him, not for myself, that I wanted a child. Then she saw her mother's face and knew that none of this could be said; it would be the ultimate rejection. She said, 'Bless you,' very softly, as a compromise disloyalty, and saw as her reward the face, gentler and older than she remembered it, grow alight.

'Oh Jane, my baby . . .' The lips trembled.

Jane was appalled. Panic engulfed her. (My mother is going to cry. My God! It can't be.) She looked round wildly. But a lifetime's discipline survived and rallied. Mrs Radley compressed her face into a smile, took out her compact and lipstick and repaired her make-up, she who never touched her face before anyone.

'We must look on the bright side,' said Mrs Radley, patting, retouching, in a dedicated fashion. 'There's plenty of time. You're very young. Now I was twenty-five before I was married and at first I—we thought nothing of it, didn't worry, I mean. And then, after a while, well, we thought everything was going to be all right. Until the first time it happened. By the time I was thirty—' she looked at Jane, bright-eyed—'I had lost five babies.'

'Five,' Jane echoed faintly. 'You never said before. Why didn't you tell me? How dreadful for you.' She could not find adequate words for the grief in the other's face.

'I carried one full-term,' Mrs Radley said. 'A boy. He was born dead. They didn't want me to see him, but I saw. My dead child. It was incredible.' She had assumed an expression of intense thought, as if trying to recall a mathematical equation which did not come easily to her.

'I'm so sorry,' Jane said helplessly.

Her mother, after a moment, shook her head abruptly and smiled. 'So you see,' she said, 'why you are so important to me. Why you always were so important. I'm afraid I haven't always made this clear. I'm not very good at expressing my feelings. I never have been. But you must have known—how much you mean to me.'

Jean nodded. She was embarrassed: glad to be close to her mother yet uneasy at the unaccustomed flow of confidence.

'At times like this you need your mother,' Mrs Radley went on. 'I wanted mine. But she was dead.' She frowned. 'There's no one else who can understand.' She seemed to be imploring Jane to agree with her.

'I know,' Jane said.

Relief passed over the other's face. 'You *are* glad I came ?'

'Of course I am.'

'Do you want to talk about it ?'

Jane shook her head. There was a slight hesitation.

'How do you feel, darling ? Really, I mean.'

Jane squirmed away, a mass of love and resentment. 'I'm all right—a bit weak.'

'I know. It's the disappointment, the emptiness, more than anything else. The rest of it is nothing by comparison.'

She paused. Jane said nothing.

'Jane, I know how you feel, but you will try again, won't you ? There's no reason why you should have my bad luck. You mustn't let this discourage you too much.'

'No, of course not.'

'You will try again ?' Voice of deep anxiety.

'I expect so,' Jane said lightly. She fished around for something cheerful to add. 'Don't worry. You'll be a grandmother yet.'

'I wasn't very nice at your wedding, was I ?' her mother remarked abruptly.

'Oh . . . that's years ago. We were all upset.'

Mrs Radley smiled very slightly. She seemed almost about to cry. 'I always prided myself on being right,' she said. 'I never expected to have regrets. But I wanted the best for you. Maybe I didn't always recognize it.'

'But you like Dino now ?' Jane asked, too eager, despising herself while she spoke.

'Oh yes,' said her mother. 'Oh yes.' She smiled at Jane and then looked quickly away out of the window again. 'He's charming, and obviously devoted to you. And if he makes you happy, then I am happy, of course.'

Jane sank into her pillows, defeated.

'Now where are you going to convalesce ?' Mrs Radley went on, gathering strength.

Jane looked puzzled. 'At home.' Then she felt the ambiguity of the word and went on quickly, 'Dino's only got this

play, so he's free all day, more or less. He's longing to play nurse-maid.'

Mrs Radley's lips smiled. 'You wouldn't consider coming to us?'

Jane said, 'But then Dino'd be all alone.'

'Well, Dino too, naturally.'

'Oh. It's very kind of you . . .

'I see. Please don't say any more. I just thought you might like me to nurse you, that's all. There's no need to look so embarrassed, you silly child. It was only a passing thought. You know how busy I am, in any case. I'll pop in to see you in the evenings when I can.'

'Thank you. I'd love you to.'

'Well, that's settled then.'

Jane wondered how she could explain what it meant to her to return to a home that belonged to her, that contained her possessions and Dino's, and the memories they had grown. It ought to be worse, perhaps, going back to a house with an empty nursery, but to Jane this meant little; if Dino could forgive her failure, she would heal faster in the home they shared. But she felt painfully that she had undone the good achieved in the early part of the interview.

'Phyllis sends you her love,' said Mrs Radley, now utterly composed.

'Oh, thank you. Please thank her for me.'

Another silence. This time her mother did nothing to help. As a child you could scream and sob and beg for forgiveness. Now Jane wrestled with the laws of adult communication. Primitive emotions must be translated into an acceptable form. Added to this was the dilemma of possible disloyalty to Dino. She shook her head, still confused yet hopeful.

'You're tired,' said Mrs Radley, rising. 'I must be going.'

'BUT WHY, MOIRA? Why couldn't I get close to her? I wanted to so much.'

Moira smiled her comfortable smile and went on knitting. 'Over-anxious, d'you think?'

'Oh yes, I was. But still—my own mother. And we had so much good-will, both of us.'

'What does Dino say? You must have discussed it with him.'

'Oh, endlessly. He puts it all down to the baby. Says it was my big chance to have something in common with my mother, and if I could have gone on about it more, that would have solved everything. But I felt it was a private affair between me and Dino.'

Moira said, 'I know. But it's more than that, isn't it?'

'What?'

'Can I say what I mean?'

'You know you can.'

'Well—' Moira paused and looked at Jane, her cow-brown eyes both kind and shrewd. 'For your mother this is a tragedy. But it isn't for you, is it?'

As always, honesty was a relief. Jane said, 'No, it isn't. But I can't say that to Dino. Oh Moira, I'm so glad you said it. I couldn't have admitted it otherwise.' To her amazement she felt the start of tears burning her eyes.

'Steady, love,' said Moira, 'You're still a bit weak, you know.'

Jane swallowed and said, 'But it's the only thing I've never been able to say to him. We share everything. That's what makes it so awful. Now there's something I can't be completely honest about.'

Moira smiled in bitter sympathy. 'You don't know how lucky you are. Only one thing. My goodness, you're lucky.'

'I'm sorry, Moira.'

Moira shrugged. 'You get used to it. It's married life. Nothing to worry about. Until people like you and Dino come along and flash your happiness all over the place.'

'Do we do that? I'm sorry. It sounds awful.'

'It's not awful at all. It's very nice. And the rest of us are only jealous.'

Jane said seriously, 'You're very generous. I'm very lucky to have you for a friend.'

'Yes, I'm very good at friendship,' Moira said fiercely.

There was obviously more to come and Jane waited for it. Moira stared hard at her knitting.

'I'm such a good friend to Patrick I doubt if he'd notice if I grew a moustache and joined the darts team. I'm a real chum. A buddy. One of the best. Good old Moira.'

There was nothing Jane could say. She squeezed Moira's shoulder and Moira smiled at her very brightly.

'Here I go, generalizing from the particular, but Englishmen don't really like women. You're lucky to have the Italian in Dino even if that's what got you into the child-bearing racket. He really likes women. He's really interested in you as a person. That's true, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Not so our Patrick. To him I'm a thoroughly good sort. He doesn't actually call me "old girl" and slap me on the back but he might as well. He has his job and the boys and the pub, and I have the home and the children. Jane, you know the worst thing? No, of course you don't; you can't, if it hasn't happened. Don't look so guilty, love; it's not your fault. Just let me have my little moan. The worst thing is to see yourself becoming like everyone else. Because we all start out full of confidence, you know. We all thumb our noses at the friends and the magazines that tell us we'll have to settle for less than the best. But, Christ, they turn out to be right. And it doesn't take long.'

'Have you said any of this to Patrick?'

Moira laughed. 'Jane love, have I ever walked in and

addressed him in ancient Hebrew? What would it *mean*? He's done nothing. He doesn't beat me; he's not unfaithful; he drinks moderately and hardly gambles at all and he gives me enough housekeeping money. What more could any woman want?'

She paused, smiling to herself almost tenderly. 'You know, sometimes I have marvellous schemes. I stab him in the night and he's not killed, only injured, and they take me away and I'm not responsible, and all the time I'm having treatment he comes to see me and we talk. They tell him it's part of the therapy, so he has to do it, and, besides, he wants to know why I stabbed him. So we just sit there and talk. Could last for months if I was smart.'

Jane said eagerly, 'I know what you mean. It's the way I used to feel about my mother. How sorry she'd be if I killed myself. If I'd tried and failed we might have had quite a different relationship. That's what you mean, isn't it?'

'I suppose so. Just something dramatic to shake them out of three meals a day and a good night's sleep. You know, like women stealing and getting caught, just so their families will take them seriously, even worry over them a little. Just something to break the monotony.' She laughed. 'What a reason to give for stabbing someone!'

Jane looked around at the warm, comfortable room, the expensive, child-worn furniture. 'As good a reason as any.'

'Aren't women funny?' Moira remarked briskly, putting away her knitting. 'No wonder men say they can't understand us. We're all violent and primitive underneath. I'll make some coffee, shall I?'

'That would be lovely.'

Moira moved heavily across into the kitchen. Jane sat and watched her with the heightened sensibility that always comes from being unexpectedly near to someone in an intimate conversation. 'How d'you feel, Moira?'

Moira's voice came faintly from the kitchen as she bent over the stove. 'Fine. The first three months are always the worst with me. Once I stop being sick I feel tough as old

boots. When are you and Dino going to try again? I take it you are.'

Jane frowned. 'Yes. As soon as possible, I suppose.'

Moira came back into the room, filling the doorway. Her red hair blazed in the light. 'Are you sure you want to?'

Jane looked away. 'Dino wants children and I want Dino's child.'

'Suppose you did tell him how you feel? Wouldn't he understand?'

'Probably. Then he could never mention the subject again. Besides, what could I say? That I'm too selfish to share him with anyone, even our own child?'

'Is that what it is?'

'I don't know what it is. I just know everything was . . . almost perfect before and I didn't want to change anything.'

'Well, children certainly change things,' Moira said. 'There's no disputing that. You have to really want them. Mind you, I'm a fine one to talk. Still, I always seem to want them once they're on the way. How did you feel? I couldn't ask you before.'

'Oh . . .' Jane thought. 'Excited. Curious. Rather important, I suppose. But all in a dream-like way. Not real at all.' Already it seemed a long time ago.

'And Dino?'

'Oh, madly protective. Very happy. Triumphant really, I think, at being successful so quickly. He talked about it a lot and made plans. Almost too much.' She bit her lip.

'I think you should tell him,' Moira said.

'I can't.'

'Well, as an interfering friend that's my advice.'

'Moira—you won't say anything, will you? *Please* . . .

'Now is it likely?'

'No. I'm sorry.'

'Hell, you don't apologize to your friends. Ignore me. You probably know best, anyway.'

'It's probably post-whatever-it-is depression.'

‘That’s it.’ Moira disappeared into the kitchen and returned with coffee on a tray. ‘How’s Dino’s play going?’

‘Very well. It’s so sickly it could run for ever.’

Moira sighed. ‘I must go. I wish I’d been fit enough for the first night.’

‘You’d have laughed. Dino’s mother was quite nauseated. She said his part was a travesty of Italian manhood, a parody, an insult, a caricature. Only she didn’t know the English words and his father had to keep translating for her. It was really very funny.’

Moira said, ‘Apart from that, though . .

‘Oh, they thought he was wonderful, of course. He really can’t do wrong for them. Well, except once.’

‘Your wedding.’

‘Yes. I wish his mother could forget it wasn’t in a Catholic church. She still says we aren’t really married and he could leave me any time. She got terribly worried when I was pregnant.’

‘But she surely doesn’t imagine Dino would leave you?’

‘No, of course not. At least, I don’t think so. It’s hard to tell. She says such absolute things, and I never know what’s behind it all. She could be thinking something quite different. And then there’s the language problem. I feel everything’s over-simplified. But she’s really very sweet.’

Moira stirred her coffee. ‘What about the child? Would it be brought up as a Catholic?’

‘Oh yes. I don’t think I could talk Dino out of that. I wouldn’t really try; I don’t have much of an alternative. Anyway, it doesn’t actually affect me. I had my way over the wedding.’

‘Funny thing, religion,’ Moira said. ‘Makes a lot of trouble. Patrick and I probably have ancestors who fought each other and here we are now, not caring a damn either way.’

‘I know. It is strange.’

‘We’re getting philosophical,’ said Moira. ‘It must be late. It’s nice, though, isn’t it?’

They settled themselves more comfortably in their chairs.

'Don't think I'm not happy with Patrick, in a way.'

'I know you are,' Jane said gently.

'It's just that you can talk like this to Dino as well, but I can only talk like this to you. These conversations have to happen. You can't make them. So it's no good asking Patrick to talk. If he can't do it accidentally he can't do it on purpose either.'

'It's like school. Saying, "Let's have a discussion".'

'The only sure way to get total silence.'

'That's it.'

Moira smiled. 'The whole point is you don't know what you want to talk about, so when they ask you you're helpless. But when you're in the middle of a conversation there's heaps you want to say and never enough time. Hulloo—' She stopped, listening.

'What?'

'Car. Patrick, I think. Oh, you get extra-special ears after a while. It's one of the perks.'

The moments were gone. They braced themselves silently for the intruder that Patrick, or anyone at all, would be. A door slammed; they heard footsteps on the gravel. Moira put away her knitting as the door opened and Patrick, handsome and healthy, big for the room, came in.

'Hullo, girls. Had a good hen-party?' He flung himself into a chair and regarded them with indulgence. 'What've you been up to this time?'

'Oh,' Moira said vaguely, pleasantly, 'just women's talk.'

As soon as she could Jane crept away, overcome with guilt at her own good fortune.

THEY HAD KNOWN each other for two hours and the party was a stupid mass of smoke and empty talk behind them. They did not know how far they had walked but they had reached the river where the lights dazzled and reflected, and the whole of London seemed to breathe quietly.

'What a city,' Dino said, and they looked at it. 'There's nowhere in Italy I feel so at home. Or get such a sense of power. Don't be afraid of it.'

'How do you know I am?'

'You are.'

They walked on and she told him about herself and her absence of dreams. She had never met anyone so easy to talk to. She told herself it was the night and the drinks at the party, and smiled, knowing that she would not believe it.

'Stop,' Dino said. She turned to look at him. 'You're not ordinary. You're beautiful.'

Embarrassed, thrilled, she replied inevitably, 'You haven't seen me in daylight.'

He passed his hand over her face as if to erase the remark. 'You're real. You have a small, gentle face, and lovely hair, and your eyes look scared. You don't have to compete with the others. It's enough for you to be yourself.'

To cover her shyness he talked about his ambitions: the work at drama school, the years in rep., the tiny, precarious toe-hold on stage and television, the ultimate dream of the cinema. All this meant poverty and he talked of that, too, making it sound both funny and grim.

'It's strange,' Jane said eventually. 'I'm usually so nervous with strangers.'

'When does a stranger cease to be a stranger? If it helps, pretend you believe in reincarnation. We have already met, thousands of years ago. Who were you?'

'I don't know.' Then, emboldened: 'Cleopatra?'

'Of course. Then I was Antony and at once it is absurd for us to be embarrassed. We are old friends. You see? It's easy.'

'It's a nice idea.'

'Play some more. Who else were you?'

She thought, aware of an excitement, a sense of unknown adventure that she only recollected on walks alone or while gazing into a kaleidoscope. 'Could I be Helen of Troy?'

'Why not? That sets me a problem, though. Paris, I suppose. But there was plenty of competition.' He paused, saying suddenly with tremendous energy, 'Don't you find these old stories fascinating?'

'Yes.' She had not thought of it before and at once they absorbed her entire attention.

'My favourite book as a child was *Legends of Greece and Rome*. Wonderful. I used to act all the parts in the garden. A born extrovert, you see, but a cissy not a sportsman. Rather nasty. Hardly the thing for an English gentleman.'

They both laughed, but Jane said seriously, 'Were they nasty to you? The other boys, I mean.'

'I know what you mean. Yes, but it passed. I turned out to be quite strong. Most people have nasty moments in childhood, including the bullies. It's probably worse as an adult to look back on yourself as a bully than as a victim. At least, it ought to be.'

They talked of school as a certain common experience, and Jane found safety in the tales of eccentric teachers and lessons mined with disaster. She discovered, though, that he had enormous respect for those who held his attention, and intense gratitude towards anyone who had helped him to grow up. She cautiously tried some memories of her own and when she actually made him laugh she felt a sense of incredible achievement, like learning to fly.

They walked and paused and walked again, and Jane lost sense of time and direction. They talked a lot and sometimes they were silent and even the silences were already

easy. Jane felt a breathlessness, a buzzing in the head, when she thought how the magazine story was coming true: reluctant and plain, you go to a party and are singled out and whisked away by the most attractive man there, an actor with a foreign name who tells you that you are beautiful.

It was a shock when Dino said, 'What time must you be home?'

'Oh. Twelve o'clock.'

He made no joke. 'Where do you live?'

She told him.

'Well, you may choose. A coffee and a bus all the way, or a taxi part of the way.' He made no apology but simply smiled as if offering her the most normal choice between two luxuries.

She took a deep breath to make herself brave. 'If we started now we could walk all the way by twelve.' Suppose there was no more to come. She knew no other way to make it last.

He said at once without the pause which would have given her physical pain, 'I was hoping you'd say that.'

They walked slowly and talked of themselves.

AFTER THEY HAD been together for six months, Dino obtained a small but regular part in a television series, and on the strength of this they had moved to a two-roomed flat. Jane teased him about reckless expenditure.

'No, darling, this is for a purpose. We have your parents to consider.'

'My parents?'

'Yes. They are still there, aren't they? Oh, I've noticed how you talk about them in the past tense, but really you want to see them, don't you, especially your mother?'

Jane said, 'Am I so transparent?'

He smiled, took both her hands and kissed them, then went on briskly polishing his shoes. 'Darling, I'd be no use to you if I couldn't notice important things.'

'I don't want her to be important.'

'She is—you can't stop her.'

'I can. I can put her out of my mind.' It was a child's mutinous cry.

'No, you can't. And why should you? All this time and not a word from her, neither of you ready to give in and each hoping the other will—'

'How do you know what she's hoping?'

'She's your mother.' He spoke easily, without resentment. 'Anyway, since I am the only person with no face to lose, I must take the first step.'

'Whatever are you talking about? You're frightening me . . .'

'No, darling. It's quite simple. The other place was squalor. Fun for a while but impossible. Now we can afford this we have somewhere we can invite your parents. I am going to see your father—you know, all this man to man stuff, wonderful. I thought about writing, but people can

tear up letters. I think he might persuade your mother.'

It was like not realizing how heavy a suitcase was until someone took it out of your hand. She still fought down hope, but a week later, while Dino was out at rehearsal, her father arrived. His obvious embarrassment calmed her and she made tea and waited on him, understanding his brisk manner. He seemed out of place in their small, shabby living-room, but his expression was kind when he looked at her.

'You're looking well, Jane.'

'Thank you. So are you.'

They had embraced briefly on the door-step: not the emotional reunion she had vaguely imagined.

'Nice to see you. Now—' he went on very quickly, nearly interrupting himself—'Dino seems to think I can talk your mother round.'

So it was 'Dino' for the first time.

'We're both hoping you can.'

'Well, Jane, you know your mother. But Dino tells me you're very anxious to get married and would like us to reconsider giving permission.'

'Yes.' It was true, yet there was a pang, inexplicable but sharp, as 'living in sin', all black and gold and irresponsible, dissolved into respectability.

'He's assured me there's no actual urgency, though,' her father went on delicately.

'No, there isn't.' They both clung resolutely to euphemism, the basic coinage for parent-child transactions.

'Well, I'll do my best. Like to see you married. Still don't like what you're doing, of course, but you've not got a bad chap there. Well, I'm not promising anything because you hurt your mother very badly, but I'll do what I can.'

As the months passed Jane became convinced that her birthday would bring reconciliation. Dino accepted her reasoning and so they planned nothing for the day. The night before, Jane could not sleep.

'Isn't this ridiculous?' she said, self-conscious.

'Not at all.' Dino lit a cigarette.

'I'm keeping you awake.'

'You're awake, I'm awake. It's called coincidence.'

'You're wonderful.'

'That's it. As long as you think I'm wonderful and tell me so, you can keep me awake every night.'

'Dino, are you sure you want to marry me?'

'Yes.'

'I can't see why.'

'Darling, if you could, you'd be me, wouldn't you?'

'I'm perfectly happy like this, though.'

'Are you trying to stop me making an honest woman of you?'

Their answers drifted lazily through the dark, warm room. Perpetual night, Jane thought, was the solution: no one to face but herself and Dino, safe for ever, and alone.

'No, but . . . I don't want to be pushed into marriage just to please parents. I like being your mistress.'

Dino slid an arm under her neck and held her close. 'Darling, you've been a wonderful mistress, but that won't stop. Being a mistress is a state of mind. As long as you think making love is more important than washing up you'll be my mistress. But eventually we shall want children and we must be married for that.'

'Yes, of course. How soon do you think—for children?'

'As soon as you want them after we can afford them.'

It seemed a long, safe distance away. Jane said, 'I'd love to have your children.'

In the morning there was no letter, no card. Nothing. She could hardly believe it.

'But why? Not even from my father . . .'

'If your mother won't, he can't. If it was us, I couldn't go against you.'

'I was so sure.'

'I know, darling. We'll just have to wait a little longer.'

She bit her lip. 'D'you think if I phoned . . . ?'

'No. Better not. You might get hurt.'

'But you took the risk.'

'It's different. They're not my parents.'

After breakfast he looked at her woebegone face. 'Come on; we're going out to buy your present.'

'What is it?' She tried to sound interested.

'An engagement ring. I've been saving up.'

'Oh. Oh, Dino.'

He laughed. 'And this is the girl who doesn't want to get married.'

'No, but a ring! Anyway, I can pretend it's for favours received. I like that idea.'

Two weeks later her mother wrote. Jane felt she had waited purposely to test her own fortitude in ignoring the birthday. Within days they found themselves in a fever of wedding preparations (as if the idea had just been suggested for the first time) and bitterly involved with Dino's mother.

'It will be no marriage,' she said flatly, tragically.

'Mamma, you mustn't upset Jane.'

Mrs Lewis ignored him. 'Jane, I appeal to you. For Dino this will be no marriage. For me it is no marriage. You don't know what you are doing. Please. I beg you. If you do this it will be a disaster.'

Dino went sharply into Italian. He stood between Jane and his mother, his expression both angry and tender. Mr Lewis put a hand on Jane's shoulder and drew her out of the room.

'It's better for us to go away,' he said. 'They understand each other.'

Jane shivered. 'I feel such a coward.'

'You're not. It's better this way.'

The voices in the next room rose and fell loudly, rhythmically. To Jane they seemed to be shouting at each other and the scene took on all the qualities of a film row—absurd, melodramatic, overdone. She was embarrassed.

‘You’ve both made up your minds; it’s Dino’s job to make her accept it,’ Mr Lewis went on.

‘I can imagine how she feels,’ Jane said hesitantly.
‘I don’t think you can.’ There was no insult, just a calm statement. ‘But Dino can. They’re both on the inside; they understand. On this subject, you and I are the outsiders.’

Jane tried hard to detach her mind from the voices in the other room. ‘You’re very philosophical about it.’

‘I’m middle-aged,’ Mr Lewis smiled serenely at her.

‘But isn’t it terribly hard for you, being on both sides at once?’

‘I’m not really. They’re on the same side. They love each other.’

Jane looked dubious.

‘Family relationships are very tough, you know. Tougher than people realize. Look how your parents are rallying.’

The rally was almost more than Jane had wanted. The entire organizational forces of the Radley family were suddenly at her disposal. She had not realized how many separate items combined to make a wedding. The arrangements went forward serenely, however, with no sign of friction, not a glimpse of a crack, let alone of cement in a crack. The only subject of dispute was the Radley wedding present. Mrs Radley, now as resolutely in favour of the wedding as if she had never been against it, wanted to give them a house. Dino refused. He refused money, too. The pressure continued. Finally he accepted a car, explaining that a luxury was one thing, necessities another.

Jane watched for anything other than professionalism in her mother. She might have been a combined caterer, milliner and florist. No feeling escaped the shiny, smooth exterior. Jane did not want to be greedy, but she wanted more than grim, energetic acquiescence: she longed for approval, comfort, personal interest.

‘It’s no good, Janey,’ Dino said. ‘She’s given in and that’s all she can do. She’ll make up for it later, but at the moment

she's exhausted. It says volumes for your father and their relationship that she has come so far.'

By contrast Dino's mother behaved with affability but as if there were no wedding. She, and consequently Dino's father also, were attending the reception only, but it was never discussed. At first Jane avoided being alone with Mrs Lewis for fear of reproach, but eventually it occurred to her that if Mrs Lewis intended any harm she would manufacture the opportunity. Jane grew braver and sought her out, as a test. Mrs Lewis continued to talk of food and clothes and what a good son Dino was.

The biggest sacrifice was returning to her parents' house the night before the wedding so that she could leave from there to be married. Dino spent the evening there and they went for a walk.

'I resent this. I hate it,' Jane said ferociously, snapping twigs off bushes as they passed. 'It's disgusting and hypocritical. I can't imagine how they can want us to do this.'

'Be kind,' Dino said. 'If it's their chance to pretend we never ran away, let them take it. Perhaps it is only done for the neighbours. It doesn't matter. It's our wedding present to them, if they need it. One night out of all our nights.'

'You're so damned understanding.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't you ever condemn anyone?'

'You know I do. But I try not to.'

Then she clung to him, crying, 'Oh, Dino, I'm frightened.'

'It's all right. Hush. You're safe.'

'They're not getting their claws into us, are they?'

'No, darling. No.'

'Oh, Dino, I want to make love. Now.'

There was nowhere, and they were forced to the ultimate absurdity of taking a bus to the flat they had left that morning. They looked at each other, saying, 'This is ridiculous,' but she was happy again, and inside the door of the flat security met her like a waft of heat or perfume. They made love at once, and she was violent and feverish as if

there would never be another opportunity. Afterwards they bathed and climbed back into their crumpled clothes. They stood in the hall with their arms round each other and listened to the dripping tap and the ticking clock.

‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure.’

She sighed. ‘Oh, Dino, you see how I need you.’

‘I need you too. Don’t be scared. We’ll be back here very soon.’

‘I’ll never sleep tonight.’

‘Yes, you will. I got you this.’ He took something out of his pocket, a tiny pill, and showed it to her. ‘Wedding present.’

‘Oh, darling.’ She laughed, and began to cry. ‘Have you got one, too?’

‘Yes, I’ve got one.’

She stepped back slightly to look at him, and his beauty and familiarity made her weak. He caught her glance.

‘Look, Jane.’

‘Yes?’

‘Sit down a minute.’

There was nowhere to sit in the hall, so they sat on the floor.

‘Tonight you take your pill and you say, “Jane and Dino, for ever and ever, amen,” till you go to sleep. It’ll work. It’s magic.’

‘You’re magic.’ She was crying all over his hands. ‘Look at all you’ve done for me.’

‘I love you.’

‘Oh, Dino, I don’t want to go back.’

‘I know. But you say our spell and it’s not really a night apart. It’ll cancel it out.’

The next day they were married.

IT WAS NOT something you faced all at once, that your husband was unfaithful.

It happened to other people and you knew before they did and said, 'Poor thing. That awful man . . .' Or you saw it coming and apportioned the blame: 'Well, if she *will* put the children first, neglect her appearance, lose interest in sex, nag him about money . . .' There was always a reason you could find: the deceived partner had failed in some way or the philanderer was basically an unsound proposition from the start. This was reassuring when you knew that none of these things applied to you.

During their first years together Jane and Dino went often to parties, where Dino was charming to everyone and most attentive to Jane. He liked other men to admire her but he did not like her to flirt with them. Jane was pleased since she was incapable of flirting. She saw how much the women admired Dino and envied her, but she knew she was secure because she and Dino loved each other and were perfectly happy. They had never even discussed adultery; it was of no possible interest. Until Magda.

Jane fought suspicion like a pain in the back until it was confirmed. At first she was incredulous and indignant. She had not been at the party but she trusted Dino. He had no cause. She told him of the rumour and he denied it at once, easily. She was contented: they made love and slept peacefully. So when confirmation came it was all the more cruel. She was sick with fear all day before confronting him with her proof.

'All right. We were drunk and it happened.'

She was dumb, shocked out of speech. She could not believe that this was the person who had done everything for her. Why did he look the same? She shook her head.

‘Jane—’

She moved backwards, away from his outstretched hand. He looked hurt and she was glad.

‘You lied to me,’ she said eventually.

‘Of course I lied. I was ashamed.’

Their words were so plain, as inadequate for disaster as for ecstasy.

‘Have you lied to me before?’ She did not mean this but she wanted to say it.

‘You know I haven’t.’ He spoke violently.

‘I don’t know anything any more.’

‘That’s ridiculous. You’re trying to hurt yourself on purpose.’

She was silent, cornered. He moved closer without trying to touch her. ‘It happened—once. We were both drunk at a stupid party. It meant nothing. I was ashamed, so I lied and I hoped you’d never know.’

‘You must have known I’d find out. You’re not in the most discreet profession.’

He said flatly, ‘I panicked.’

‘I can’t imagine that.’

He stepped forward abruptly and seized her by the shoulders, shaking her. ‘Stop it. You’re trying to make it worse.’

‘Worse!’ She choked. ‘You’re accusing *me*. You think *I* can make it worse.’

‘You’re playing a game to hurt. You’re wasting time—our time. I love you. This thing means nothing unless you let it. One tiny stupid lie means nothing. Can’t you see that? We are important; nothing else.’

He was so near she could feel his body, smell his skin. She was suddenly overcome with rage because she wanted him, and she jerked herself out of his hands. She went away and behaved childishly, slamming doors to stop herself crying. She took the car and drove it too fast, thinking almost with satisfaction, If I am killed he’ll never forgive himself. She hated him savagely because he had hurt her, but more

than that because he had taken away her security on which she had lived since they met. He had spoiled perfection.

Now she was shrunken, reduced. Her uncertainty and inferiority spread like a stain over blotting-paper and she allowed it to do so. Yet she knew all the time that she was trapped. At some point the car must head for home and Dino. There was no one she could tell. She was the prisoner of her perfect marriage and she did not want to crack the image in the sight of her parents or her friends. Even more, she was caught up in the back-log of years: of friendship, love-making, conversation, reassurance, private jokes, a shared home. She could turn to no one else.

Returning, she sulked to see if he would crawl. He did not. He was calm, pleasant, apparently without guilt. He waited on her a little, but no more than usual. She wondered if he even realized what he had done. Her feelings worked their way up inside her until she burst out almost incoherently, 'Aren't you going to talk about it?'

He said quietly, 'I've nothing more to say.'

'And you think that makes it all right?'

'No.'

'Then what?'

'I can't do any more. I can only wait for you.'

'Oh. You're so sure I'll come back, of course.'

'No, I'm not. I just hope you will because I love you. Because what we have is too good to waste.'

'You still think so?' She was desperately scornful.

He said patiently, 'I've told you.'

Presently he went to bed and she did not accompany him. After he had gone the clock ticked loudly and the furniture stared at her. She gazed at things with the fixed concentration that seems to promise some obscure revelation: a means of escape through a chair or a sudden insight into a speck of dust. It was too intense to last long. She got up and padded round the room, catching glimpses of herself in the mirror. She saw the days and nights of this, extending in front of her. How could it replace the reality of Dino? Perhaps he

was right; she wanted him to be right. The impregnable fortress could not be destroyed at a blow.

She was glad when she capitulated and ran to his room. In his arms she had the luxury of weeping and his comfort: 'I love you. It will never happen again, I promise. It's all gone. My love, this is us, together.' He could tell when she was ready to move from tears through peace into love and he was tender and leisurely until the end when they both lost themselves. To Jane it was primitive magic and she made it wipe out the stain.

'THE WEDDING WAS horrid,' Jane said to Lisa. 'Stiff and formal. No feeling anywhere. I hated it.'

'I suppose you had to have it,' Lisa said. She sat on the floor in silver lamé pants, very tight, and a loose, dark-blue sweater. Her legs were artistically arranged at photogenic angles: an instinct by now, Jane supposed. 'But it's ages ago. Forget it.' She lit a fresh cigarette. 'You're still happy; that's the main thing. I call it a miracle.'

'Don't you believe in marriage, then?' Jane was still a little overawed by Lisa, whose silver hair and nails and perfectly designed clothes made her seem like a sculptured figure. She had never before seen anyone whose poise was unshakable, whose make-up was always elaborate and immaculate; it would have been boring as well as intimidating if beneath the perfection there had not lurked a face of irregular planes and slanting angles and doubt.

'Not for me,' Lisa said. 'And it doesn't work for many people, as far as I can see. Really work, I mean.' She smiled at Jane. 'You and Dino seem to be an exception. It's very pleasant to see: makes us old cynics feel young again.'

'Oh, Lisa, really.'

'Don't wriggle, ducky; you're proud of it, aren't you? I would be.'

'Aren't you happy with John?'

'John?' Lisa stretched and relaxed; Jane could not decipher her expression. 'I haven't walked out yet; shall we put it like that?'

'Do you think about walking out?'

'Often. It keeps me sane.'

'I never did, even before we were married.'

Lisa said patiently, as to a backward child, 'But you were living with Dino, not John.'

Jane wanted to be envied, to hear Dino praised, but was not sure how to engineer the conversation. She said timidly, 'What's the matter with John?'

'Oh,' said Lisa lightly, 'nothing a little psychiatric treatment couldn't cure.' She patted her hair; Jane noticed that she never sat very far from a mirror.

'Well,' she said at last, 'if you think about walking out, why don't you?'

'Walk out on my meal-ticket?'

'Oh.'

Lisa said, 'Sorry; have I shocked you?'

'No.'

'I see.'

Lisa's smile was hard to bear. 'I'm just surprised,' Jane insisted.

There was a pause, during which Lisa appeared to be thinking. 'Look,' she said finally. 'Have you ever thought how many aspiring young actresses there are, at a rough guess? Starlet. You hire a mink jacket and attend half a dozen premières. You're duplicated ten times over, a hundred, maybe. The number of distinct female types is pretty limited, after all. So what makes you special? Why should you get the part rather than one of the other hundred? They don't know you; you've never done anything. Or if you have it was in some tin-pot Hebridean rep they've never heard of, or ten seconds as a corpse on BBC. Well, I live with a director and that makes me special.'

Jane said slowly, surprised at her own reaction, 'So it's true—what they say about the casting-couch.'

'Not exactly.' Lisa sighed: a careful lesson gone to waste. 'Some make it without. Some are just brilliant. Some have brilliant agents. Some are just lucky or have relatives in the business. Some just work hard and wait. In any case, the casting-couch, as you call it, can be pretty unreliable. You've got to pick your man.'

'And you picked John.'

'After he picked me and I realized why.'

'May I ask—why?'

Lisa laughed. 'Oh, sure. I wouldn't be that cruel. It's really very simple. He needs me.'

There was a silence, and Jane felt embarrassed at the flaunting of human need. Lisa seemed to misinterpret her silence. 'Are you surprised? That's the basis of every relationship, supply and demand.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Then I've shocked you. I keep forgetting how young you are.'

'We're the same age.'

'That's right.'

'Lisa, why this pose?' She was taking a chance. 'Why this old and weary outlook? Why pretend?'

'Who's pretending?'

'Oh, please. I'm serious.'

'So am I. I do expect the worst from people and very few prove me wrong.'

'Maybe that's why.'

'Oh, sure.'

'You don't believe me.'

'Jane, I'm excepting you and Dino from this—'

'That doesn't matter.'

'No, but I mean it. Most people, though, are totally selfish. I know I am. And almost everyone I know is. But John is the king. You notice tonight. He'll talk about himself and his plans all evening.'

'Don't we all do that?' Jane said guiltily.

'Not really. You, for example, are a good listener. Dino asks questions. But John makes statements. Even his questions are statements, if you know what I mean. When he says, "How are you?" he means, "Ask me how I am, because I intend to tell you anyway."'

Jane said, 'You sound as if you hate him.'

'No, I don't. I despise him, though.'

'Why? For being selfish?'

'No. I told you; we're all selfish. For not being able to

disguise it. For being weak enough to need reassurance the whole time.'

Jane thought of herself and Dino, tucked the memories away where Lisa could not scratch them, and said, 'But we're all like that.'

Lisa said crisply, 'I'm not. I've trained myself. I only need success and if I stick with John I'll get it. The day John Gregory can't help me any more is his last day with me.'

The door banged. Jane said, 'They're back.'

'About time.'

Lisa's exposition of John made Jane particularly aware of him when he came in with Dino. She studied him carefully for the first time; since meeting Dino she had scarcely noticed another man. John was a little below average height, with light brown hair and thin, sharp features. He radiated energy whereas Dino exuded vitality. He had none of Dino's beauty or classical elegance of movement: none, in fact, of the obvious advantages which made Dino an object, less vulgar than most, of fan worship on a modest scale. There was a calmness about Dino even when he was excited, a confident self-acceptance; but John seemed perpetually nervous, high-strung, insistent: on the brink of some discovery.

'Champagne,' said John unnecessarily, as he banged the bottles down on the table. 'Because we deserve it.'

'How nice,' said Lisa. 'Did you bring any cigarettes? I've nearly run out.'

John tossed her a box of fifty and Jane watched Dino offer her one of his own and light it for her. You don't have to, she thought; you didn't hear our conversation. Why do you and John seem determined to act your parts so accurately?

'To us,' said John, when the first bottle had been loudly opened and the others put on ice. 'And to many another roaring costume drama and the public's sudden, unaccountable taste for them.'

'It's a reaction,' Dino said casually. 'Not unaccountable.'

I prophesied it, didn't I, Jane? When we were young and starving.'

'Not exactly, darling. But you did say people would get tired of the kitchen sink.'

'Well, anyway,' said John, 'it's here. And we'd better cash in while we can. It's nauseating but it makes money.'

'John, I don't agree,' Dino said. 'It's not nauseating; it's fun.'

'Careful, Dino,' said Lisa. 'That's a dirty word to John.'

'Dino, you're not serious.'

'I'm perfectly serious and you know it. What is so superior about being out of work? We are all young and new to the job, comparatively. How do we know what we can do? Maybe this is our limit. But, in any case, if we do this let us do it straight, as well as we can.'

'My God,' said John, staring at him. 'You're an idealist.'

'Don't worry, John,' Lisa said. 'It's not catching.'

Dino shrugged. 'So I am an idealist. Call it what you like. I like to eat and I'm prepared to put heart and soul into something that allows me to do so.'

'It's just Latin practicality,' said Jane defensively.

'All right, Dino, I forgive you,' John said. 'You're easy to direct, so I'll make allowances. But I don't have to share your madness. I'm doing this strictly for cash, for as short a time as possible. The day I find a backer for my big film, I'm out.'

Lisa yawned. They all drank deeply of their champagne.

'You'll never find a backer for your big film, John,' Dino said. 'I'm sorry, but it's blasphemous and you know it.'

'Balls.' John sat up violently. 'That's a load of balls. You're talking as a text-book Catholic—'

'All right, so I'm talking as a Catholic—'

'I said a text-book Catholic. That's what galls me. You sit in judgment on my film and the Church you're shouting about doesn't even consider you married.'

Jane flinched. Dino said quietly, 'That's my private affair. I'm a bad Catholic—agreed. I've never pretended to be

otherwise. But a film is public property. No one will touch the film you want to make.'

Beneath all the excitement Jane sensed a basic comradeship between the two men. Curious, in spite of herself, she asked, 'What's it about?'

John wheeled round. 'Dino didn't tell you?'

She shook her head.

'Dino.' John laughed suddenly, surprisingly, and looked like a schoolboy. 'The ultimate insult.'

'Have some more champagne,' Dino said.

'I will. I'll need it, to talk to Jane. It's a long story.'

'Synopsis, darling,' Lisa said. She was chain-smoking and watching John closely. Jane thought she was like a banderillero selecting the spot in which to place the next dart. She wondered why John needed someone who was so obviously bent on deflating him. Was it a public game? Did Lisa behave very differently in private?

'Mary Magdalene and Christ,' said John. He paused impressively, then rushed on. 'Title undecided as yet, but it has to be exactly right. I'll get it. There's a whole lot about it I've not settled yet; maybe I won't till I actually shoot it. I'll do the dialogue myself, of course, or maybe I won't need any—'

'He thinks he's Britain's answer to Ingmar Bergman,' Lisa said.

'—Unless I find a writer who agrees with me *exactly*—'

'Which is terribly likely, isn't it, darling?'

'But don't you see it, Jane? A theme that has fascinated Christians for centuries. It would have immediate impact. Religion; man and woman. God and woman. Sex—frustrated, of course, but only just and we'd keep them guessing till the end—political intrigue, death. It couldn't miss. It would be a sensation.'

'It would be banned,' said Dino.

'Lawrence got away with *The Man Who Died*.'

'That's hardly the same thing: an imaginative interpretation of the Resurrection. On paper.'

'Oh, Dino.' John looked triumphant. 'What's the difference? If the fellow's an immortal god, it makes no odds whether we set the story before or after they crucify him. It's still a story about Christ and a woman.'

'And it's still not original,' Lisa remarked.

'You're only talking like this,' said Dino with careful good humour, 'because you know it annoys me.'

John ignored him. 'Jane. Does it annoy you?'

Jane said, 'That's hardly a fair question. You heard what Dino said.'

John made a noise of disgust. 'You married people, you daren't disagree. Lisa doesn't mind disagreeing with me, do you, Lisa?'

They looked at each other, an oddly calculating stare, and Jane was deflected again from the point at issue to vainly probing their relationship. They seemed to be playing some game of which only they knew the rules.

'You could get half-way through the film,' said John, resuming as if there had been no interruption, 'before anyone realized what you were doing. Political meetings and prostitution. Close-ups of faces. Have the suspicion creep up gradually. Well, maybe not half-way through but some part. Then into this girl's obsession—that's what it was, of course. Fantastic. It'd knock all the priest and penitent films into the ground.'

Jane was divided and therefore uncomfortable: fascinated by John's idea and enthusiasm, and disturbed by Dino's controlled hostility.

'Black and white,' said John, 'naturally. Sombre. Silhouettes at the end, or is that too corny? Then cut to Mary, back on the job. Something on these lines, but there's no point in having it cut and dried before we reach the set. My God, it couldn't fail.'

Suddenly Dino started to laugh. 'John, you're wonderful,' he said finally.

John regarded him with the utmost suspicion.

'Really,' Dino went on. 'You're so keen. You'll never get

to make this film, but with all this keenness you really deserve to succeed. I should never get angry with you.'

John said, 'You never do, you rotten bastard. That's the whole trouble. Let's have another drink.' He slopped champagne generously into all their glasses. 'Here's to my next film with this lousy Italian bastard. Here's to you, Dino.' They drank.

'And to me,' said Lisa.

John raised his glass high. 'To Lisa. May she—' But he choked and left the sentence unfinished.

Lisa said, 'Are we going to toast everyone we know?'

John shook his head vigorously. 'Only the ones who matter.'

Dino raised his glass, a tiny gesture, to Jane, who acknowledged it. John said in staccato American, 'And now, friends, we see it is by these small courtesies that true togetherness is fostered.'

'Keep it up, John,' said Lisa. 'You won't have a friend left by morning and you can start over.' She slurred the last words derisively.

'Dino understands,' said John. He turned to Jane. 'Actually,' he said with concentration, 'I had one or two, you know, before we got here and I think—I think perhaps the combined effect—'

'John,' said Dino, leaning forward, 'it is perfectly all right.'

'That's our Dino.' John appealed to them both. 'Jane did herself a favour there.'

'She knows,' Lisa said, 'already.'

'Jane, I'm not embarrassing you, am I? Praising your husband to your face.'

Jane shook her head, having no idea what to say.

'Too bad he doesn't recognize my genius,' John continued, 'but he's a good guy.' He switched accents. 'A decent chap.'

'Yes, darling,' said Lisa. 'Now drink your champagne.'

'Grapes,' said John, surveying his glass, 'downtrodden

by countless pairs of feet. Sweaty, I dare say. Or is it all a myth ? Like Chinese women being built sideways. Or *is* it a myth ?' He laughed.

'You could, of course, throw us out,' Lisa said, 'and the odds are you wouldn't regret it.'

Dino said with unexpected sharpness, 'Don't be silly, Lisa.'

'Well,' Lisa said with a shrug, 'he gets like this sometimes.'

Jane's mind, switching from one to the other, adding and subtracting, became muzzy with effort. John stood up suddenly and as he walked across the room she saw that he was perfectly steady on his feet.

'I'm not drunk,' he said, in his normal voice again, throwing the words at them over his shoulder. 'But, Christ, I wish I were.'

THEY DISCUSSED THE evening in bed that night: one of the abiding pleasures of married life.

'John was in a strange mood,' Jane said. 'I've never seen him like that before.'

Dino lit a cigarette. 'He was depressed, that's all.'

'All? He was quite nasty to you.'

'No, he wasn't. He was just John letting fly. It's quite different.'

'Lisa was talking about him before you came. She was very bitter. Said he demanded reassurance all the time.'

Dino sighed. 'She's right. Whatever John is saying he's really shouting for help.'

'Oh God.' Jane was depressed. 'That is sad.'

'Yes, it is. He's a nice person; I like him.'

'Do you like Lisa?'

'Yes, I like Lisa. But not as much as John.'

'We had such a funny talk. She prides herself on being tough, you know.'

Dino said, 'Oh, she's probably not so tough underneath.'

'Dino, surely some people who are tough on top are tough underneath as well? They must be.'

Dino laughed. 'Of course they must, some of them. And I don't really know about Lisa.'

'She's very sharp with John.'

'Yes, she is. But I think he wants her to be.'

'They must have a funny relationship. She told me she's only with him as long as he can help her career. I wonder if he knows that.'

She felt Dino shrug. 'Doubt it. I wouldn't be the one to tell him, anyway. Besides, it may not be true. Lisa says a lot for effect.'

'She certainly does.' Jane brooded. 'She acts old and

worldly-wise with me. Seems to think I'm an infant.'

Dino laughed. 'Poor darling. Did she hurt your feelings?'

'No.' Instantaneous and automatic; then, recollecting it was Dino: 'Well, yes.'

'It's the oldest trick in the world: run away and play, little girl. It's amazing that it still works.'

Jane held his hand. 'You are good for me.'

'Jane, I wish you'd remember you're much luckier than Lisa and everyone like her. You don't have to put on an act.'

'I don't know how to.'

'No. You don't need to. We've discussed this before and you must believe me. I know what I'm talking about.'

'Doesn't it make me nondescript?'

'Not at all. Now fish for another one.'

'Oh, Dino.'

'I mean it. You're just real. When I first saw you and talked to you, you electrified me.'

'And there was I thinking, "Why is this gorgeous man bothering with me?" I felt so ordinary.'

'Well, if you're not past that now I've been wasting my time on you. Surely I can reinforce you against people like Lisa?'

'You do—really. It was just a chink in my armour.'

'We should have sympathy for John and Lisa. They're unhappy people.'

'I have sympathy for the whole world,' said Jane softly. 'Everyone who isn't us. People in love are awfully smug, aren't they?'

'That's probably the chief way you can recognize them. But in an extreme form—the way we have it, really badly—it's for home display alone.'

'It's wonderful,' said Jane. 'It gives me real purpose. You don't ever wish I had a career, do you?'

'No.'

'There's nothing I could do, really. And I like just concentrating on you.'

'Which you do extremely well.'

Jane said seriously, 'Yes, I have improved, haven't I? I'm quite a good cook now and I keep up with the laundry. I'm not even as untidy as I used to be.'

Dino stubbed out his cigarette. 'Yes, you have improved in all these ways. But you know that's not what I mean.'

She felt a shiver of pleasure. 'Isn't it?'

'No, it isn't.' He moved closer. 'It's all very nice, but I'm talking about your qualities as a mistress.'

'Oh.'

'Yes.' His hand crept over her softly, pausing and stroking. She trembled. He kissed her, very gently at first, then deeper and harder. 'Jane.'

'Oh, please. Please.'

'You're not too tired?'

'No.'

'And you haven't drunk too much?'

'No. No.'

'That's funny.' He flicked her lips with his tongue. 'I haven't either. Oh well, in that case . . .'

Jane thought wildly, They say this wears off, fades away, but it doesn't. They're wrong; they're so wrong. Then all thought was extinguished except the loving and wanting, and she was lost, drowning in pleasure.

'NO REASON AT all, Mrs Lewis, why you shouldn't have a perfectly successful pregnancy this time.' Cheerful, jolly doctor, beaming at her. Abortive first pregnancy quite common; nothing to worry about; thorough examination; perfectly fit, healthy young woman. But still, just to be on the safe side, could do no harm to refrain from intercourse, just for a few weeks, nothing drastic.

It wasn't drastic, of course, if you were the doctor, not doing the refraining, not married to Dino, wondering. Looking back now, was this where the real harm had begun? Dino took the advice seriously, never wavered, never even showed signs of strain. He was between pictures, doing some television. Off to London in the car, home late, or early (timing erratic); phone calls, messages, irregular meals. He treated her like porcelain, talked of the baby, how wonderful it was. Rest; keep quiet; put your feet up; take it easy.

Abstinence was not unbearable for her, though she scarcely recognized herself; physically there was little urge for love-making. But emotionally she yearned for it more than ever.

It would have been nice to feel it was all in a worthy cause.

Mrs Radley knitted, embroidered, talked babies, moved in on her life. 'See me,' Jane wanted to yell. 'I'm a person, not a maternity vessel.' Her previous failure was carefully glossed over, obliterated. Her father treated her tenderly, with pride and perhaps even a shade of embarrassment. Mrs Lewis vaulted between extremes of maternal emotion and dire prophecies. Mr Lewis was obviously delighted with her good sense in not being discouraged; that he did not guess her state of mind diminished, however unfairly,

her opinion of him. She was encircled, the focus of their hopes.

'I'm rooting for you,' said Moira, knitting furiously. 'It'll be fine this time, you'll see.' Her third wailed in its cot at her elbow.

'Rather you than me, ducky,' said Lisa, painting her face. 'Once was enough. But I wish you luck.'

'You, Lisa?'

'Don't sound so surprised.' Lisa did her eyes with care.

'What happened?'

'Oh, fine healthy boy, mother nearly died. Can't have another. It makes life simple.'

'And the baby?'

'Some good people adopted him.'

Jane hesitated. 'The father?'

Lisa shrugged, her expression inscrutable. 'Oh, God knows where he is.'

Impossible to question Lisa. They lit cigarettes and talked of immediate things: work and people and books they had read. Impossible to ask, 'Did you love him, did it make you like this? Or was it trivial, an inconvenience, nothing more?'

'Guido, if it's a boy,' said Dino. Somehow they instinctively abandoned the names for the first one: unlucky, trespassing. 'And for a girl?'

'I don't know; that's more difficult.' She tried to visualize a daughter answering to a name. There was a blank; not even a feeling of hostility.

'English or Italian?'

'I don't mind.'

They talked names half the night.

Alone, Jane began to think, 'What if I die? Suppose this is the end of my life? These final months are all I have left. Five years with Dino, very nearly; four of them married. A short life out of twenty-four. None of the rest counted.'

She did not share her fear with anyone but tried to live

more intensely. They could make love again and she was greedy for it, every night, feeling the times numbered. She tried to talk to her mother, pointlessly reviving her own babyhood when she felt her mother must have found her least disappointing. She was rewarded: out came the familiar photographs. 'You were a lovely baby, darling.' As her mother looked at the album of Jane, she studied her mother, the powdery surface of the face, the lines, the carefully moderate rouging of cheeks and lips. A face was such a mask. With the baby between herself and Dino she longed more passionately than ever for contact with her mother. What emotions were hidden? Surely this was a real person who had suffered and doubted herself. Why the polite pretence? Could they never really meet?

'It's the biggest thing for a woman,' said Mrs Radley. 'Men can't understand. Your father did his best; he was very good. But only another woman can really know what it feels like.' She smiled at Jane.

So this was the price: the exclusion of men. Their role over, they could be down-graded. Join our sisterhood; you are one of us. The price was too high, even to join her mother. Yet she was still her mother and the yearning was still there: to do something, to achieve something, to make her proud. .

Dino was away on location; that hurt. She did an endless round of friends and relations, slept alone, thought of him. The house seemed much too big and perfect. Empty. She phoned him late one night; there was no answer. The next night he was there and she complained.

'I went for a walk. I was too tired to sleep.' He went on talking, asked her all about how she was, spoke to her lovingly, sounded, in fact, just the same.

The girl in the film was pretty, with light hair and wide-set eyes. She was seventeen. Jane had met her and she seemed hardly able to string together two sentences, but Lisa had said, 'This damned kid could be a star', and Lisa never wasted compliments. John and Lisa were resting, Dino

working for a woman director on this film about an Italian lodger and the landlady and her daughter in a village on the Cornish coast. Valerie Gilbert was the director: big, dark and mannish, forty or forty-five, she at least did not worry Jane. She raved about Sandra, who played the daughter. The film was subtle, intense, different. It could be a sensation. If not box-office entirely, then prestige, prize-winning.

Then the letter: 'Your husband is pretty busy at the seaside.' Cheap paper and childish script. Some jilted, disappointed girl? Jane used all her strength in hanging on, disbelieving. Unfair to recall past lapses, excused, explained, forgotten. Oh God, forgotten, please. Days passed and Dino was just the same on the phone, missing her, excited about the baby, enthusiastic about the film.

'I wish I were well enough to be with you.'

'So do I, darling. Take care of yourself. You're so precious.'

She could not ask him, though each time she meant to, as the natural thing to do. She never did.

Then the next letter: 'He's never had a double ration before. But you know what they say about variety.'

Pain. I'm imagining things. Fine healthy girl, no reason. Perfectly normal. Some vicious little kid making up stories. But Lisa nearly died. I'm all right. Lie down; take it easy. Be sensible. Can't ask him; it's all a lie anyway. He wouldn't, not again; he knows how I feel. Pain. Not a second time. Not again. Oh Christ, let me have this baby, let me prove something. I know I didn't want it, but now let me do this. I don't believe it. I don't. I won't. I can't. Oh, Jesus Christ.

I must have phoned. I'm somewhere else. There are people. I wonder who they are. It did hurt. Maybe it's all right. How long ago, I wonder. I've no sense of time.

'I'm sorry, Mrs Lewis—'

Well, if I open my eyes it might help. Oh dear. Kind,

unfamiliar face; going to say, 'I'm afraid . . .' I'll save it the trouble.

'I see.'

Look round a bit. My mother is there. My mother is crying. I really do see.

'Where's Dino?' What a calm voice I have.

'He's on his way.'

No hurry, when you come to think of it. Too late for this little performance. Only in time for the questions I don't want to ask.

'WE MUST TALK,' she said to Dino.

He said (protectively, self-defensively), 'You're not well enough.'

'Oh yes, I am.' She glanced into the mirror. 'I just look ghastly. Don't be fooled by my appearance.'

'Jane, don't talk like that. Please.'

'Sorry; do I offend you?' She felt nervous and light-headed, intoxicated almost. 'Come on. We've got a lot to discuss. Those notes, for example.'

He said after a pause, 'They were filthy.'

'Yes, they were, weren't they? But true.' He made no reply. She added sharply, 'True?'

'Yes.'

'You had them both, Sandra and Valerie.'

'Yes.' He sat there, looking neither away nor directly at her, just answering.

'So no more lies,' she said, almost sadly.

'I'm sorry. I only lied to protect you. And because I was ashamed.'

'I suppose that's something. You feel shame.'

He said nothing. She cast around carefully, gathering her strength. 'It was a pity about the baby, wasn't it?'

'Jane, don't.' A sound like a groan.

She said lightly, 'Do you feel responsible?'

He looked at her then and she saw that he was crying.

'Yes, I do.'

He had cried professionally, she remembered, and in any case it probably came easily to the Italian half of him. He did it rather well, not messily.

She said, 'Well. There it is. Do you have some wonderful excuses?'

'No.'

'What, none at all? You're slipping.'

'No excuses. There are reasons, of course.'

He kept his dignity, she thought, remarkably well.

'You'd better tell me about those, then.'

He lit a cigarette and she watched his hands shake. 'We were working very hard. Sandra was nervous, her first film. She leaned on me rather—'

Jane interrupted. 'Are you going to tell me it was all her fault?'

'No. I'm explaining how it was. She became so she couldn't snap out of it, off the set. I think she hardly knew what was real, what was acting.'

'Oh, I see. Just like they say in stories. And what about you?'

He bowed his head. 'I was a bit the same way.'

'Well, well. You should have saved that story to explain Valerie. Anyone could fall for Sandra, after all; she's beautiful. You don't need a story for her.'

'It's the true reason. And I did not fall for her.'

'It doesn't matter. We both know what you did. Were you her first lover?'

'Don't.'

She wanted to go on, but the memories were too precious and hurt too much. 'Tell me about Valerie, then. She's the big surprise.'

He looked desperately tired. 'I don't know if I can. It seems so unfair.'

'Oh, I see. I'm not even entitled to hear about her, it's too private and special.'

'No.' He sighed and threw away the cigarette, lighting another immediately. 'It's another person's shame. She has so little. Well—she's a Lesbian; she has fought it for years, losing mostly but winning a little, but never quite . . . getting across to the other side. We used to drink together in the evenings, and talk. She was becoming desperate, sliding back, right back. She was frightened and she needed help.'

'Which you provided.'

'I tried to.'

There was a pause; then Jane said suddenly, sharply, 'Are you making the whole thing up?'

He shook his head.

'It sounds incredible.'

He said off-handedly, 'It's perfectly true and quite ordinary.'

'We move in different worlds.'

He made no reply.

'Well,' Jane said. 'What now?'

He said rapidly, 'I don't know but I love you. I've always loved you. Maybe you can't believe that, but I can't stop saying it, because it's the truth. I've never lied about that.'

Just like the women's magazines. 'And that makes it all right?'

'No. But it should—I hope—make some difference.'

She frowned, trying to see ahead. 'But what happens in the future? Does this go on for the rest of our lives?'

He said quietly, 'I always hope it's the last time.'

'Then you're not being realistic, are you? We've had four so far. Four that I know about.' She saw his head jerk upwards and his mouth open. 'Oh, don't bother, please. No more lies. There may be hundreds for all I know.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'It's no good, Dino. If you tell lies, people never believe you. That's common sense, isn't it? They don't know when you're telling the truth.'

'Jane, this is us, not people—'

'Oh, I've had that routine before. Don't you even remember?'

He was silent and she found it disturbing to be so much in control. 'Well, there are four. One drunken, one persistent, two needing help, as you call it. That's pretty comprehensive. Anyone in any of those categories comes your way and the result's the same. That's a nice prospect.'

He said, 'All right. I deserve all that, and worse. But I

love you. I love you, Jane. These people mean nothing to me compared to you. They never meant anything.'

Jane thought. 'How would you feel,' she said slowly, 'if I had had four different men since we were married?'

There was a pause. She watched his face, usually so expressive, become a mask like other people's. 'I think I'd want to kill you,' he said finally.

'Well?'

'But I wouldn't. And for men—there are differences.'

'That won't do. You know me. You're being dishonest.'

'Jane, there's a difference between your wanting sex, suddenly and physically, with me, and wanting mere satisfaction with someone else, anyone.'

'So you did want it?'

'Well, of course, to some degree.'

'So you weren't entirely the social worker with the kind heart?'

'Oh darling, please. It begins like that and it changes. The usual things happen. Surely that's not so hard to understand?'

'Well, surely you can understand that you've hurt me?'

'Yes. But if I keep saying I'm sorry will you believe me?'

They were silent, trapped. She could be comforted only by the one person to whom she could not turn for comfort, because he had hurt her.

She said shakily, 'It's getting a little monotonous.'

He nodded. She did not know where to turn for help now and felt the exhaustion that comes with defeat.

'I think I'm tired,' she said. 'You'd better go.'

He got up. 'D'you want me to come tomorrow?'

'I don't know. We haven't really talked.' She felt tears prick the back of her eyes. She blinked hard, and swallowed.

'No, we haven't.'

She went to her parents to convalesce.

‘MOIRA . . .

‘Yes, love?’

‘Moira, I don’t know how to say it.’

‘Just say it. You’ve been prowling around ever since you arrived. I won’t mind what it is.’

‘I know. But I might.’

‘Oh,’ said Moira, understanding. ‘Dino.’

‘Yes.’

‘Look, Jane, if you want to talk, that’s fine and I won’t repeat it to a living soul. But if you don’t want to talk or you want to stop half-way that’s O.K. too.’

‘You’re good. I feel such a fool, me and my perfect marriage.’

‘Everyone has a bad patch now and then,’ said Moira in a matter-of-fact tone.

‘It’s just that . . . I don’t know what to do. I can’t talk to him any more. He can’t help me.’

Moira nodded.

‘Moira, you know, acting’s an awful job: there are so many temptations, and women just throw themselves at actors.’

Moira said, ‘I’m sure they do.’

‘Well, you see, we’ve always been so happy together, but, well, it is very difficult to be strong all the time and Dino’s a bit weak.’

‘Yes.’

‘Something happened while he was making this film, before I had the miscarriage.’ She began to shake. ‘There were two of them. Someone wrote me a letter.’

Moira put an arm round her shoulders and hugged her, hard.

‘But it wasn’t the first time, Moira. There were two others, before, separately. And . . . he denies it at first, so I never

know when to believe him.' She was talking faster and faster. 'There may have been any number I don't know about. He's always so sorry and wants us to go on as if nothing had happened. Well,' she broke off abruptly, 'are you shocked?'

'Is it likely?'

'Moira, I don't know what to do. I mean, if he's always going to be like this, have we got a future at all?'

'Now steady.'

'Well, I don't know any more. I mean, how many times can this happen without having any effect? I thought I'd die the first time, and then the second . . . But this last time—oh, God.' She began to cough, feeling sick.

Moira said, 'Cry if you like, love. It might help.'

'I keep trying,' said Jane in a muffled voice. And then after a pause: 'Oh Christ, isn't this ridiculous? I can't. Oh well.' She got up and began to walk about again.

'Look,' Moira said. 'Shall I barge in? I can only see two possibilities. Either you make one hell of an effort and forget it and believe it will never happen again and believe *completely*, or you go the other way and accept it as an ordinary fault like drinking or gambling. You can't just go on hoping and fearing all the time.'

'I don't know,' said Jane. 'I don't know.' She continued to walk, wrapping her arms around herself as if she were cold.

'It's the only way,' Moira said. 'And I am speaking from experience. A different fault, admittedly, but the procedure's the same. You have to make up your mind one way or the other.'

'It's so hard,' Jane said faintly.

'I know it's hard.'

'You see, I can't—I just can't believe this is happening to me.'

'Oh,' said Moira, 'I know that feeling. But you get over it.'

'But I don't want to—I can't face it. I'll be just like everyone else. Oh, I'm sorry.'

'That's all right,' said Moira after a moment's silence.

'I *am* sorry; I just remembered how you said it and it came out.'

'I know. It's all right.'

'You think it will happen again, don't you?' Jane demanded feverishly.

'I don't know, love.'

'Oh yes, you do. There's no hope. He's made like that. That's what you mean, isn't it?'

Moira sighed. 'What does he say about it?'

'He says he feels just the same about me—about us. But how can he? Or if he does, how can he do it? I can't believe he's the same person. If this collapses, I've got nothing.' She spoke faster, her voice rising.

'Hang on,' said Moira, squeezing her shoulder. 'Try to keep calm. I'll make some tea.'

Jane followed her into the kitchen. 'Moira, what am I going to do?' She looked at her hands, so familiar, that had been with her through all experiences, and thought distractedly that they weren't much use now. She looked round at Moira's kitchen furniture impassively regarding them, and wondered if she was going mad.

'Keep calm,' Moira said again. 'You're still very weak, you know. It's very dangerous to talk about decisions when you're not in a fit state to make any.'

They sat on either side of the kitchen table, waiting for the kettle to boil. Jane suddenly felt very tired.

'I wish I could help,' Moira said.

'No one can.'

'I hope you don't regret talking about it.'

Jane said, 'No.' It was all the same if she did.

'You see, if this is Dino's one weakness and in all other ways he's a perfect husband and you're happy with him, I think you should settle for that,' Moira said.

Jane looked at her wretchedly. 'Do you?'

'I'm sorry if that sounds callous, but you've still got a lot more than I have. You can talk to Dino and he cares how you

feel. Don't you realize what that means?' She smiled bitterly. 'And I don't imagine you have any trouble getting him to make love to you. It's very humiliating to have a husband who doesn't want to—at least, not very often. It gets depressing, wondering if tonight you'll be lucky, watching one week turn into two. I'm sorry, I don't mean to embarrass you. I only wanted to show you there are other problems—worse ones, I think.'

Jane said, 'I'm sorry. I didn't realize . . .

'No, well, it's as hard to admit in its way as your problem. Our pride's hurt, in both cases. We're not supremely attractive and irresistible after all. Anyway, I thought you might feel a bit better about talking to me if I told you. It's not easy admitting things like this and you feel worse if the other person seems to have nothing to admit. I couldn't have said it before.'

Jane managed to smile. 'Poor old women.'

'It's ironic,' Moira said. 'Lots of women would be delighted to have their husbands leave them alone, as they call it. Why can't I be one of them? But I really want Patrick. Half the time he doesn't notice, but when he does—I never know if he's just being kind or if he really wants to, if you follow me.' She was staring with concentration at the pattern in the kitchen lino. 'It's rather bloody.'

'God, I'm sorry.' Jane felt quite inadequate.

'The kettle,' said Moira, swooping up and seizing it. 'At last.'

'Can I help?'

'No, you sit tight.' With very few objects she suddenly became immensely busy. 'Would you like some biscuits? Or cake?'

'Thank you.'

'Well, which? Oh, never mind, I'll put both on the tray.' She filled the sugar basin and dived into the fridge for milk. 'There. Two cups, two spoons. You see,' she went on in the same tone, 'men are good husbands in their own way. They give what they can. It's unreasonable to demand

what they can't give. If you want the impossible that's your problem. Your own bad luck.' She smiled. 'At least, so I tell myself in my saner moments. You can't foresee these things. People change; you never know another person completely. It wouldn't be good if you did. I'm sorry. Am I talking heresy?'

'Maybe. Or just common sense. I don't know any more.

'Drink your tea.'

They ate and drank mechanically for a while. Then Moira said, 'I want to help, you know. But I can't say any different. Make a fresh start when this film is finished. Wipe the slate. You've got so much to be grateful for, honestly.'

HER PARENTS LOOKED after her well. There were nourishing meals and early nights and carefully vetted library books. She could feel herself regressing, becoming more helpless. It was pleasant to contemplate herself as the loved and pampered daughter she had never actually been. But her mother did not discuss the miscarriage this time; all the concentration was on building her up, strengthening her, looking to the future, but in an indefinite way. They were busy preparing her, but no one seemed to know what for. For my life, Jane thought: to go on with my life, whatever that means.

Dino phoned and they had stilted, polite conversations. She put on a cheerful face for her parents and talked carefully about the film, so near completion. They expected she was looking forward to going home. She trembled when they said this, and wondered how Dino was getting on in his last weeks with Sandra and Valerie. She looked critically in the mirror and thought over their past life. It would be easier, she decided, if I'd done something that I could put right.

Phyllis came over and they made inane talk. She produced excuses for Joyce who never, understandably to Jane, accompanied her. Old school acquaintances, who would in the ordinary run of life have forgotten her, dropped in to talk to the wife of a film actor. The old times they referred to were ludicrously hard to remember and she doubted if she really provided the details they required of her glamorous existence.

At first Mrs Radley had cut down on her welfare work to be with her daughter, but she gradually resumed it, and this gave Jane more opportunity to be with her father. She studied him while he pruned the roses and thought, with

almost guilty tenderness, how much older he looked than the last time she had seen him.

'Well, how are you feeling?' he asked, taking a moment's rest.

She smiled at him. 'Fine.'

'That's good. Nothing like a bit of peace and quiet. You young people live a hectic life.'

'Yes.'

'Still, expect you'll be glad to get back. We like having you, you know that, but it's not like being in your own home. Can't be.'

That was generous of him, she thought, even though the timing was unfortunate. She did not know how to accept such a gift, so she pressed his arm.

'Mind if I give you some advice?' he went on after some hesitation.

She shook her head.

'May be quite wrong, of course. Just an idea. You've had a bad time over this baby business. Very upsetting. I know the current vogue is to keep trying but I'm not so sure it's always best. Why not take a rest? Forget it, even for a year.'

She said, 'Yes, we might do that.'

He brightened. 'After all, it's you two that really matter. Of course you want a family; everyone does. But there's no sense in wearing yourself out to get one, missing all the fun.'

'No, I know.'

'Course you do. Am I an interfering old man?'

'Oh *no* . . .'

'You've got lots of time; you're young. Dino's a good chap. You might like to go with him on these trips of his.'

'Yes. I would.'

'Not a good thing always, you know, these separations.' The snipping at the rose-bushes began again.

'No, I know.' Temptation loomed; became irresistible. 'Actually, we've had rather a bad patch.'

'It happens a lot. Bound to. Young people shouldn't be separated. Or have too much on their minds. Concentrate

on each other; that's the important thing. Let the family come in its own good time.'

A spasm of pity seized Jane. Had he been unhappy, then, forced through five miscarriages and an adoption? Had Mother neglected him? She wanted to let him know she understood without saying too much, because he seemed to be speaking from the heart and she feared to trespass.

'It's nice of you to say all this. I think you're right.'

'Want to see you happy,' he said. 'Nothing else matters, you know.'

It was strange to hear the hedonist doctrine from her father after knowing him for so long. She and Dino had felt they were its chief adherents; it was not a thing you expected to share with parents. And all this had to be equated with conventional morality over her elopement and the embarrassed generosity prior to the wedding. He was a whole person, kind and inconsistent like other people, and she had not so much misjudged him as ignored him. Too much attention given to her mother, too much anxiety, too much stone-wall-beating.

'You can't live someone else's life,' her father added, and she understood as clearly as if he had said, 'I can't be disloyal, but you are in danger from your mother.' Right or wrong, it touched her.

'I know,' she said.

'That's a good girl.' He was snipping furiously and she reflected that this was the inevitable pattern of confidence and withdrawal. With relations or friends the same moment came: after being close you must be distant. Except with Dino. Only with the person who loved you could you choose freely, without following any rule.

'Shall I make us some tea?' she asked, to show she knew the rules and also because she needed her own company for a moment. He accepted eagerly and she walked indoors, over the lawn and the crunchy gravel, breathing in the smell of the day and resting her eyes on the old house, serene no doubt because it had been cherished for so many years. Here

I spent my childhood, she thought, untalented and alien, horribly inconspicuous, struggling all the time like someone trying to climb a high fence, legs dangling, madly kicking around to get a grip on the smooth surface. Now I'm back, after all the years with Dino. But I can't shelter here: I never belonged. If I deny Dino, I have nothing.

She stepped into the kitchen, always cool and beautifully cleaned by Greta, and put on the kettle. Now the sense of being in someone else's home was very strong.

DINO CAME TO fetch her and stayed a few hours. They were all four very polite, but Jane watched her mother closely and decided she had lied. She doesn't like him, she thought. She never has and nothing has changed.

It was a physical shock, not altogether pleasant, to see Dino again. She had not, of course, forgotten that he was attractive, but the force of it, which could only be felt in his presence, had escaped her. He seemed taller, darker, more dramatic. He looked more elegant in his casual clothes. She began to shake inside.

Once away, alone in the car, she did not know what to say to him. It was the longest separation they had had, and the most deliberate. Yet no one had dared to suggest what it might actually mean, she herself least of all. She did not know if Dino realized what the danger had been, or even if there had really been any danger.

'You look lovely,' he said.

'Thank you. I feel much better.'

'Did you have a good time?'

'Yes. They were very kind.'

'Did you talk to them?'

So this, perhaps, had worried him. 'No.' She waited for him to ask if she had talked to anyone else, but he did not. Instead he said, 'That was good of you,' making her feel guilty.

'I might have done if I could,' she said. 'But I couldn't.'

'My father came to see me,' Dino said. 'He talked around the subject, not saying anything. He seems to think you're unhappy and he's worried because he's so fond of you.'

'We've got nice fathers,' Jane said.

'Yes.'

They drove on in silence. It really was extraordinarily difficult to start again.

'How's the film?' Jane asked eventually.

'Good, I think. It really might do something.'

'I don't think I shall want to see it.'

He made no reply and she wondered if she was being childish. 'Is that silly of me?'

He sighed. 'No, darling.'

'What's the matter?'

He said reluctantly, 'I just want to forget all that.'

'D'you think I don't?'

'I know. It's just that I'd looked forward so much to seeing you again, being with you.'

'You thought everything would be the same?'

'No. Perhaps. I'm not sure what I thought.'

'Well, it can't,' she said sharply.

'No.'

She was trembling so much that she thought he must see it. 'I didn't mean to quarrel.'

No answer.

'Oh Dino, please, I really didn't. I don't know what to do; I'm going crazy.'

Dino put out one hand and grasped hers, keeping his eyes religiously on the traffic. She clung to the hand and the windscreen blurred with her tears.

'Darling, darling.' He went on saying it, slowly, gently. 'It's all right. Cry if you want to but don't hurt yourself. It's all right. I just didn't know what to say.'

'Neither did I.' Between sobs.

'Well, that's something we have in common.'

She coped with her tears and said presently, 'I don't want to go home. Not at once.'

'All right. Where do you want to go?'

'Can we go to a nice hotel?'

After that she enjoyed the drive. London began to seem safe and familiar again, a place of adventure. She took an interest in the shops they passed, feeling rather like an escaped nun. During the six weeks with her parents she had scarcely been outside the house and garden.

'I've had a check-up,' she said, and then shivered in case this seemed too blatant an invitation in the circumstances. For several weeks she had tried to ignore surges of desire.

'What did they say?'

'Oh, they were very cheerful. But I don't want to try again for a long time.'

'No, of course not.'

'You don't mind?'

'Darling, whatever you say is all right. You've had an awful time.'

She had meant to say that she had never wanted either child, to punish him, and that she would never have another. But now she couldn't.

The hotel was beautiful: small enough to be quiet and large enough to be comfortable. They dumped her suitcases in their room.

'All this luggage of yours,' said Dino, 'and I don't even have a clean shirt.'

'It's not dirty,' said Jane. 'You look very respectable. Anyway, you can buy one if you're really bothered.'

'Such opulence. I remember a time when a new shirt took a month's savings.'

'Yes.' She was not ready to play this game.

'I'll have to shave with your razor and borrow your toothbrush,' said Dino. 'Do you mind?'

'Of course not.' But she hated the new permission-asking. She sat in a chair and indulged herself by watching his grooming.

'Where do you want to go?' he asked when he had finished.

'I think I'd like to go to a concert.' But there was no programme they fancied that was not fully booked, so instead they ate slowly and expensively, consuming iced melon, and chicken and mushrooms, and drinking champagne. They returned to their room early and listened to the wireless. It played all their old Cole Porter tunes until Jane thought her heart would burst or suffocate her.

‘Dino.’

He crossed the room and they were in each other's arms for the first time and it was home-coming. It did not take long to make love after so many weeks apart and the emotional impact was such that Jane was not sure if the champagne had blunted or sharpened her physical senses. She had remembered the delight of climax, in so far as anyone can remember it, because she had lain awake, often, desiring Dino even while she hated him. But she had forgotten the aftermath of tenderness because it had been incompatible with her state of mind. Now it returned overpoweringly after being held at bay for so long. Had she ever really considered the loss of all this? They lay awake for hours, talking and smoking cigarettes, and when she went to sleep she knew she would not dream again of the baby because his arm was round her. In the morning they made love again, more roughly and satisfyingly perhaps, but it was the afterwards she remembered, when she cried with safety and contentment.

THEY DROVE HOME next day, early, in a dream. The Surrey countryside spread out around them; to Jane it had never seemed so beautiful before. 'I have two weeks free,' said Dino. 'Let's have a honeymoon at home and do nothing and see no one.'

But when they got back the phone was already ringing. 'I'll ignore it, shall I?' Dino suggested.

'No, answer it,' said Jane, imagining his agent. 'It might be a part.'

'More likely a parent, to see how you are.'

But it was John: loud and indignant. 'Where were you? I've been phoning night and day.'

Dino mouthed at Jane, 'It's John.' The voice continued almost incoherently for some time and Jane grew impatient. Finally Dino covered the mouthpiece and said, 'He wants to come here. He's in quite a state. Apparently Lisa's left him.'

Jane flopped into a chair. 'Well, she always said she would one day.'

'Do you want me to tell him he can come or not?'

She knew it was not Dino's nature to reject and since she felt lucky and happy herself she said, 'Let him come.'

John arrived with speed that suggested he had telephoned en route. He wore very oddly assorted clothes and carried, ominously, a small suitcase. Jane looked at him and questioned the laws of hospitality.

'Christ, it's good to see you,' he exclaimed in their doorway, dumping everything. 'I've been going mad. You can't imagine what it's been like.'

'Come in, John, and sit down,' said Dino.

'I could use a drink,' John said plaintively.

'Coming right up,' said Jane, who was already mixing one. 'Though it is only ten to twelve.'

John looked at her with a face of tragedy. 'What does that mean to me?' he demanded. 'I haven't slept for thirty-six hours. The bitch. The bloody little bitch. Thanks.' He drained the glass and handed it back.

Dino said, 'Do you want to tell us about it?'

'Oh, I don't know.' John put his head in his hands. 'I just want sympathy. Lots of it. There's not much to tell in any case. She packed and walked out the night before last. Said a lot of bloody things and skipped. I rang all her stinking friends, but she wasn't with any of them, or so they said.' He tried to smile, but his face contorted and Jane realized with a shock that he was close to tears. She gave him another drink.

'She'll have to turn up eventually,' Dino said. 'Don't take it to heart; that's what she wants you to do.'

'No.' John shook his head. 'She means it. She's gone for good. I can't help her any more and she's gone.' He turned on Jane suddenly. 'She told you she'd do that, didn't she?'

Jane nodded, uncomfortable.

'There you are,' said John to Dino, as if glad to prove him wrong so that the misery could remain undiluted. 'She said she'd never loved me; it was all an act. Out for what she could get. Well, don't stare at me,' he added to Jane, almost shouting.

'Shall I go away?'

'No. No. I'm sorry.' He flung himself back violently, his head bouncing against the back of the chair, and suddenly his whole body went limp. Dino caught the glass before he dropped it. 'I'm a bloody fool,' he said in a light boy's voice. 'I'm sorry, people.'

'That's all right, John,' said Dino. 'Just say what you like if it helps.'

John shook his head slowly. 'There's no point.' He lit a cigarette, apparently much calmer. 'God, I'm a ham, though, aren't I, Dino? Not the way you'd have played that scene at all. Funny I can direct. Because I can. Like theatre critics, I suppose.'

'I'll get some lunch presently,' Jane said. 'I expect there's a tin somewhere; we've been away for weeks.'

'Food,' said John. 'Who needs it? I tell you, Dino, she really knows where to hit. You know, you can't be too careful. Let someone get close to you and this is what you get. God knows what she'll be saying about me.' He smiled shakily. 'What an object lesson.'

'Not at all,' Dino said. 'You can't live in a vacuum.'

'Lisa does.'

'Well, if she does, it must be very bad for her. You were just unlucky with Lisa, John.'

'I trusted her,' John said.

'I know.'

'That was my damn fool mistake. You can have a good time without trusting people. So why do I bother?'

Dino said, 'Everyone has to.'

'No.' John waved a finger at him. 'Now that's where you're wrong, Dino. Oh, maybe it's all right for you and Jane, but for us ordinary mortals—' he shook his head grimly—'fatal. That's what I've learnt.'

'John,' said Dino patiently, 'it truly isn't so.'

Watching him, Jane was amazed at his concern. He really does care about people, she thought, and felt a pang of jealousy. All the times he has hurt me and he takes all this trouble over John. Then she remembered the night and hung on to it tightly to prevent herself sliding backwards. She wondered if life from now on was to be a matter of emotional scale-balancing and a memory trained to function only in prescribed areas. Her mind had been shut to this since yesterday afternoon; with several similar talks behind them they had not discussed anything further.

John stayed for a week. He was a strenuous guest, needing prolonged entertainment punctuated with bouts of melancholy and shared introspection.

'For someone with a broken heart he eats quite well,' Jane said to Dino.

'People eat to comfort themselves.'

They played all the card games they knew and John bought a succession of games in cardboard boxes. He played with fierce concentration, seeming to care passionately over the loss or gain of a halfpenny and drinking all the time, though he hardly appeared to notice if it was beer, whisky or tea, and the effect scarcely varied. Occasionally he and Dino indulged in savage shop-talk which Jane did not follow completely, never having taken much interest in it, or he produced his Mary Magdalene project with which to provoke. Much laughter and back-slapping ensued.

Apart from these activities John liked long walks round the Surrey lanes. Jane left Dino to share these and it was during one such afternoon that Lisa telephoned. To Jane it was a shock, like hearing from the dead.

'You won't tell John where I am, will you?' she said almost at once.

'No. Well, I don't know where you are.'

'I mean don't say anything. That I phoned, or anything.'

'All right.'

There was a pause; then Lisa said, 'How is he?'

'John?'

'Of course.' She spoke sharply.

'All right. He was very shaken up when he arrived . .

'But he's over it now, is he? Bully for him.'

Jane felt guilty, wrong-footed. 'I don't know. He's so highly strung all the time, isn't he? It's hard to tell.'

Lisa laughed slightly. 'I bet he's driving you mad.'

'Well, he's not an ideal guest and we had been hoping to be alone.'

'Of course. I'm sorry. How d'you feel?'

'Oh, I'm fine now.'

'And Dino?'

'Very well.' How much or how little did Lisa know? Better change the subject. 'Any chance of your going back to John, Lisa?'

'I certainly hope not. I'm going to make a film for Bill Forbes, you know.'

'Yes, John said.'

'It's a terrific part; I may really be on my way.' She proceeded to tell Jane about the part at great length. What a profession, Jane thought, depressed; they are always just about to make the big time. While Lisa talked, she planned to phone Moira later on, tell her the good news, let in some sanity. 'So I think it may be quite something,' Lisa wound up. 'Better than that muck I used to make with John. Though I understand he and Dino are tackling a *comedy*.' She put a world of contempt into the word.

'That's right.'

'Well, I've heard of sick jokes, but this is ridiculous. Lots of pretty girls, I understand.'

A chill, a moment of panic. 'Are there? I haven't heard much about it.' And indeed she had heard little during the past week that was not related to John's troubles.

'Our little friend Sandra, I believe, on the run from the hot clutches of Valerie Gilbert . . .'

So it was true. But if Lisa dropped this so casually how much more did she know?

'And that girl—her mother's a friend of yours—Joyce something.'

'Latimer.'

'That's it. And some Italian bit, unknown.'

The yawning pit opened at the feet, like the split ground shown in pictures of earthquakes. Was life always to be like this now, full of narrow escapes and flashing lights and danger signals? She wondered how she would bear it and whether Lisa knew what she was doing.

'Look, I'll leave you my phone number,' Lisa said. 'Ring me up when John moves out and maybe we can meet.'

'All right.' She could not understand why the self-sufficient wished to condescend.

'Oh, and Jane . . .'

'Yes?'

'You really don't think he's too broken up?'

LISA'S NEW FLAT was modern and smart, in an expensive part of town. She opened the door in a conventional film star's lounging attire, but her smile seemed genuine.

'Come in. It's nice to see you.'

'This is very grand,' said Jane, looking round.

'Isn't it?' said Lisa frankly. 'I saved my pennies in the reign of John, of course. How is he, by the way?'

Jane was not sure what answer Lisa wanted. 'Well, he's gone, as you know. He stopped talking about you the last day or two, if that means anything.'

'Where did he go?'

'I don't know.'

Lisa looked uncertain, as if Jane had caught her for once at a disadvantage. She tapped her teeth. 'Oh well, he's a big boy now. Cigarette?'

'No, thank you.'

Lisa lit one for herself. 'Well, sit down. Make yourself at home. Can I get you a drink?'

'Not yet.'

'Sorry, I forgot. You drink by the clock, don't you?'

'I suppose I do. Does it matter?'

Lisa smiled. 'Forgive me; I'm being boorish. I haven't seen you for ages and the first thing I do is insult you.'

'That's all right,' said Jane, softened by the unexpected apology.

'We should stick together,' Lisa went on. 'We have so few friends.'

Jane felt an automatic protest rising at this, but the touch of fear which accompanied it suggested the truth. She checked her words and tried to think honestly. She and Dino seemed to have countless acquaintances and persons of influence to fill their house at parties, but people whom they

willingly invited for no ulterior motive were few indeed. They had often agreed in the past that they only needed each other, but Jane had noticed how the friendship with Lisa and John had somehow survived, and she knew how, despite Patrick (an obstacle to be avoided), she cherished her friendship with Moira. Dino had more genuine friends of his own, mostly in some branch of the profession, and with many of them she felt ill at ease.

'You see,' said Lisa, who had been watching her. 'It's true, isn't it? We're too wrapped up in ourselves; that's the reason. Not outgoing.'

'It's strange. I never thought we had much in common. You always seemed so sure of yourself.'

'So I am, in a way. At least more sure than I am of anyone else. But don't be misled by surface things. Just because I'm a career girl and you're not, for instance, you mustn't assume we can't be both the same type.'

'What type?'

'The little scared mouse yelling for notice.'

There was a silence and Jane felt her face grow hot with anger and embarrassment while she fought to find words.

'Well, well,' said Lisa in a clinical tone, 'that certainly went home.'

'Is that why you asked me here?'

'Oh, come on. That description includes us both.'

'Seriously, Lisa. I'd like to know why you asked me here.'

'Oh dear.' Lisa sprawled carefully on a curved settee, as expected a piece of furniture as all the rest in the room. 'I can see it's no good appealing to your sense of humour. Are you sure you won't have a drink?'

'No, thank you.'

'Well, I will.' She got up and poured herself one.

'Why did you ask me here, Lisa?'

'Can't I have several reasons? It's really not simple.'

The change from command to pleading was very disconcerting. 'I suppose so.'

'All right. The humiliating one first.' She drained her

glass. 'I wanted someone to talk to. Yes, me; Lisa. The tough career girl. I've had a week alone, to think, while John's been pouring his heart out in your sympathetic ears. Has he said a lot of dirt about me, by the way?'

'No,' said Jane. 'But he's talked to Dino more than to me.'

'Well, naturally. He's got one hell of a crush on him.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'Oh—he admires him. You know. Like an elder brother or something.'

'I didn't know.'

'It's not important. Anyway, I wanted to see a friendly face and put my side of the story. It's so good to be in my own place again, apart from being lonely, I mean. No more pretending to do.'

'John said you told him you'd never loved him.'

'Yes, I did say that. It wasn't true, of course. You get quite attached to someone you've lived with for four years. I did love him once, a long time ago, but not for long. It's impossible with John. He has nothing to give.' Her expression was bleak and she seemed to stare through Jane as she spoke. 'He just takes all the time and you have to pretend. I'm so tired of pretending.'

Jane watched her, puzzled and fascinated.

'I wonder what he'll do,' Lisa said, almost to herself.

'Is there any chance of your going back to him?'

Lisa sighed. 'Oh no,' she said, as if another person had imposed the decision.

'But you seem worried about him.'

'Well, naturally. When the nurse walks out she worries about her patient. He's been leaning on me a long time. Who's going to look after him now?'

'Is he really so helpless?'

'He's alone, isn't he? Anyway, he has no resources. He puts everything into the job when he's working; in the evening he's drained.' Her mouth tightened. 'He has to be teased and insulted back to life. I tell you, if I'd stayed much longer I'd have become a raving sadist. Then he's

wound up like a toy and you need all the stamina you've got to keep pace with him. That's when the pretending starts. Pretending you're interested in his dreams and plans and the worries of the day, and all the rest of the one-way traffic that he doesn't even notice is one-way. Pretending the love-making works, when really you'd be better off if you could leave your vital parts behind and go to make a cup of coffee.' She laughed, not at all amused. 'Am I shocking you?'

'No.'

'Well, it's all part of your education, isn't it?'

'I said no. You might have done once but not now.' She was angry and disturbed.

'Little girl grows up. Well done.' Lisa clicked her tongue approvingly. 'Oh, I'm sorry. Being rude is such a reflex now, I can't stop. Thanks to your friend and mine. Oh, the hell with it. I'd give a lot to meet a man who could think about me for two minutes, instead of himself. Now that's not unreasonable, is it?'

'Have you never met anyone like that?'

'Once, I suppose. A long time ago and two minutes is a generous estimate. Otherwise they're all alike. Bastards, every one. Mind you, I picked a winner. Trust little Lisa. That's why I'm a career girl. You know where you are with a career.'

Jane said hesitantly, 'You seem to have made John feel it's a mistake to trust people.'

'Well, good. If I've done that, he owes me money.' She stood in front of the mirror and gently swung her hair to and fro. It was shorter than Jane remembered it and very straight, curving inwards a little at the ends. 'Let's talk about something else. You know, I play a prostitute in this film. D'you think I can do it?'

'I suppose so.'

'Why? Because I'm an actress or because it's type-casting? Oh, I'm sorry; there I go again. They say prostitutes are frigid, don't they? Do you think that's true?'

'I don't know. I've never thought about it.'

Lisa smiled. 'Haven't you really? Well, if it is true, it's type-casting. Are you surprised?'

'What?'

'Don't look so embarrassed, ducky. Are you surprised I'm frigid? Oh, I know it's not the thing to admit: nowadays everyone pretends to have great big orgasms all the time, but here goes. I am a frigid woman.'

Jane had discussed this with Dino once and he had doubted the existence of such a thing. She opened her mouth to say so, then, suddenly frightened, shut it again.

'Oh dear,' said Lisa, who had been watching her closely, 'I *am* having an inhibiting effect. That's what happens when you tell the truth. No wonder people hardly ever do it. It's my new thing.' She spun round in a circle, digging her heels into the thick white carpet. 'After years of pretence I shall tell the truth. Do you think that's a good idea?'

'I don't know.' Jane was cautious.

'Well, do you tell the truth?'

'Yes—usually.'

'Do you ever lie to Dino?'

'No.'

'Really?'

'Oh, Lisa, what's the point of this?'

'No point, nothing. Don't look so uneasy.'

All through the visit Jane had had the feeling that Lisa concealed some secret purpose and she waited for it to be revealed. She suspected that Lisa was testing her reactions in some way, had something to tell or something to find out, but she was afraid to say as much to Lisa. Perhaps Lisa knew a lot about Dino's affairs, more than she knew herself. She clamped down fiercely on this line of thought much as an alcoholic might slam shut the door of the liquor cabinet in an effort to resist. But she resented the effort, and the resentment made her realize that on the previous occasions one slam of the door had been sufficient. Now it kept opening again.

She made her excuses and escaped soon after.

DINO WAS STUDYING his script. Jane sat in her opposite chair and studied him. For days she had played over the conversation with Lisa but could find no clue in it. The suspicion, however, remained. And why had Lisa made such a point of ringing up and mentioning all those girls in the film?

It was not mere jealousy but panic: the difference between losing a job and facing the end of the world. She did not know how to reopen the subject or whether she wished to reopen it. This time there had been no emotional promises made, but only the coming together and the resumption of normal life. They had not mentioned the subject again and she did not even know if he ever thought of it. Completely inexperienced except with him, she wondered now how these things ended. Did it all finish with the film, neat and tidy, or were there odd meetings, phone calls, a clinging reluctance to part? Did Dino have to shake them off or, worse, was there reluctance on both sides?

He appeared to concentrate completely. She was sure that under such scrutiny from him she would have looked up in a second. She studied every line of his face. It was not pleasant to regard him as a separate person again. This was a luxury you could only enjoy when you knew all was well. Here was a person who earned his living by pretending to be someone else, whose face was well known, who answered letters from adoring strangers, loved his parents, spoke two languages and had a wife he was unfaithful to. No. That is not what I mean.

‘Dino?’

He looked up, only mildly annoyed at the interruption.

‘Is it a good script?’

‘Not at all bad.’

He goes back to it. I meant to say something quite different, more important, but no matter. At least I have spoken, established contact.

If he had never met me, what then? He would have married someone else, undoubtedly, and been unfaithful to her. Stop it.

'D'you think John can make a comedy?'

'I don't see why not. He's showing quite a flair for it.'

'Only Lisa makes him out to be such a tormented soul.'

'Oh, Lisa.'

Back to it again. People can be farther away from you in the same room than in Australia. (Why Australia?) But there is no reason why he should not concentrate. He does not know anything is wrong. What is wrong? Is anything wrong? I am going mad, that's all; nothing much. No one will notice if I do it quietly.

She made a big effort, using all her strength, so that it became very obvious why they called this 'getting a grip on yourself'. While hanging on she repeated silently inside her head, 'I am imagining things. I am making a fuss about nothing.' Eventually she dared to unclench her muscles, and found herself weak and trembling. She relaxed and emptied her mind as far as she could. At ten she was able to bring in coffee and biscuits as if nothing had happened because, after all, nothing had.

They fell asleep almost as soon as they were in bed, although she had expected to keep herself awake. Later Dino woke her.

'Janey? Are you all right?'

She said, 'Yes,' automatically, before noticing that her face and the pillow were wet.

'You were crying in your sleep,' he said gently, embracing her. 'What's the matter?'

'I had a nightmare,' she said, and remembered Lisa's question.

THE WEEKS PASSED slowly and for some of the time she was happy. Their evenings were very quiet. The film was progressing well, but Dino arrived home tired from the business of being funny. One night she managed to ask about the parts played by the three girls, and he told her as if he were answering an ordinary question.

She went on a few shopping trips in town with her mother and derived some satisfaction from the routine exchange of comment on garments seen. One time her mother went home early with aching feet and Jane, feeling guilty and secretive, went to the studios, ostensibly for a lift home. Her heart pounded with fright; she had no idea what she expected to find but she felt like Bluebeard's wife. Dino greeted her with surprise but obvious pleasure, John less so. There was no sign of the girls.

'Is John all right?' she asked on the drive back. 'He looked very tired—almost ill. And he was very off-hand.'

'I'm afraid it is Lisa. She is his ulcer. You know?'

'Has he seen her again?'

'No, but he has found out where she is. Now he keeps telephoning her and each time makes it worse.'

Next day, feeling ashamed and light-headed, she told Moira what she had done.

'You're crazy,' Moira said. 'You really mustn't go on like this; it's very bad for you.'

'Wouldn't you, in my place? I mean, it's understandable, isn't it?'

'Yes, but so are lots of things that are bad for you. You've got to look ahead, love, not backwards.'

'I am looking ahead, in a way,' said Jane morbidly.

'I mean look ahead to nice things.'

'Do you think there are any?'

'Oh Jane, for heaven's sake.'

'Moira, please listen. You know I told Dino I didn't want to try again for a baby, not for a long time.'

'Yes.'

'Well, if I'm not going to do that, what am I going to do?'

'I don't know.' Moira glanced through the window to make sure that the children were all right in the garden. 'What does anyone do?'

'But I'm not anyone.' It was out before she could stop it, before she even realized that it needed to be stopped. 'There you are. That's my big mistake. I am. And in the past, you see, Moira, I used to look forward to being even happier. Because at first we got happier all the time, we really did. For two years, maybe longer . . .'

'You're looking back again,' said Moira patiently.

'No, I'm not, or perhaps it's the same thing. I feel I'm going round in a circle.'

'You haven't got a temperature, have you?' Moira asked suddenly. 'You sound feverish.'

'I'm all right.'

'Look, Jane, if all this simply adds up to suddenly wanting a baby, surely you can tell Dino you've changed your mind?'

'It doesn't.'

'You never know. It's a very mysterious thing, but you can want one without realizing. I'm sure that's how I had my accidents. And it explains why I was pleased when really I should have been furious.'

Jane shook her head.

'Well, don't dismiss it out of hand. It happens to lots of people. And losing a baby, even one you didn't particularly want, can be a very upsetting experience.'

'It was a long time ago,' said Jane sharply. 'I've forgotten all that.'

'You're fooling yourself,' Moira said.

The immensity of the problem and Moira's failure swept over Jane. 'You don't understand,' she said, and felt the

start of tears as she pronounced the childish words.

Moira took it well. 'All right,' she said, 'Why don't you talk to Dino? Tell him how you feel. He'll understand and you'll feel much better.'

'But it's like saying I don't trust him.'

'Well, you don't,' said practical Moira.

'No, but I want to. Maybe it's only a question of time. Maybe if I just wait I'll feel normal again.'

'Well, I advise you to talk to him. Or to forget it.'

After that Jane stayed away from Moira for a while, trying to think for herself again. When the fever was at its height she determined to talk to Dino that very evening, but it always happened that he came home specially loving and attentive, and gave, without being asked, all the reassurance she required. It was like finding all your symptoms had disappeared every time you reached the doctor's surgery. She was afraid then to throw away so much happiness by referring to old crimes. How could you breathe down the neck of a crook going straight and urge him to admit he had fallen again? And that was not the way she wanted to think of Dino.

Of course, good behaviour might indicate a bad conscience.

After this thought came she had no peace at all. Yet she felt the strain of concealment so acutely that she thought, if only for justice's sake, it must be effective. So it was a shock when Dino, quite suddenly at nine o'clock one evening, looked up from some letters and said, 'Well? What is it? You've been watching me like a hawk all week, and last week, and maybe before that, too, only I was too busy to notice.'

It was her chance, but not as she had expected it. 'I'm frightened,' she said eventually.

He knew at once. 'I thought so. You're waiting for me to make a mistake, aren't you? Answer me. Aren't you?'

'You're shouting.' She was startled.

'Yes, I am shouting. Because I'm angry. When I'm angry,

I shout. What the hell do you think you are doing to us? Do you know what it feels like when you behave like a jailer?’

‘I don’t like behaving like one.’

‘Then don’t.’ His shout reached its peak. He added in a quiet, normal tone that somehow frightened her more than ever, ‘I will say it once more. I am sorry about the past. I am bloody sorry. I regret every woman I have ever hurt you with. But I cannot go back and change it. All right, it is all my fault, but there is nothing I can do. How long do I have to crawl before you despise me, and then what happens?’

‘I know,’ Jane said. ‘That’s why I didn’t want to talk about it.’

‘Then you must stop thinking about it. Darling, you’re hunting me and I’m so tired. I’m sorry; I know I should be strong when you need me, but at the moment I am tired and depressed.’

‘I’m sorry. I’ve been too self-centred. Tell me about it.’

‘Oh, it’s nothing much. I suppose I am just disillusioned. That sounds very pompous, doesn’t it? I’ll try to be more specific. It’s a very childish thing really. I mean it is childish of me to mind so much. But I realize now that I am never going to be a great actor. I am never going to be a flop, either, but in a way that makes it worse. Not entirely, because I enjoy acting and I enjoy making a living at it, but I always hoped—well, you know what I hoped.’

‘Yes. But you’re tired now; you’re looking on the black side.’

He smiled at her, almost tenderly. ‘You can’t tell, can you? The difference between good and very good. It’s not just prejudice.’

Jane said, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘It doesn’t matter. It’s just funny. You know, you take it for granted that everyone knows . . .’ He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes, and she saw with a shock how tired he really was, and felt ashamed.

She said, ‘I’m so sorry; I wanted to bring you luck.’

He opened his eyes with an effort. 'Darling, you have. You have made me successful. No one can make a good actor a great actor; it has to come from inside. I used to think perhaps when I was much older . . .' He shook his head.

'Oh Dino, what's made you feel like this?'

'I don't know; perhaps the rushes.'

'Well, if it's just this picture—' she jumped in eagerly—'you haven't done much comedy and neither has John.'

'John's all right; he works like a fiend. And I am all right. But that's all. And I wanted more.'

Jane held his hand because she could think of nothing to say.

'You know, it's funny,' he went on presently, 'about my last film. I know you won't see it and I quite understand that, but it is the best thing I've done because the part suited me and—please don't be hurt—because *on the set* everything was right. It was such a team. Still not great, you understand, but something to be proud of. And I am not going to do better. With this film or any other.'

'Dino, you can't be so sure of that.'

'Yes, I can. When you're tired you see truly. Clearly. And lose your grip on words,' he added, laughing a little. 'Well, that's the main part. And films are my best thing, really, so I shall be a little less good on television and less good still on the stage, if I ever go back to it.'

'Darling, don't. You're making up all these divisions.'

'No.' He shook his head again. 'No, no. Anyway, let us forget it all. Apart from my hurt pride there is John and his trouble. While he is working he is completely professional, which takes all his strength, hence the total collapse when he is not working.'

'He still wants Lisa back?'

'That suggests free will. No, he just needs her. It's a terrible thing she's done, to leave someone who needs her so much.'

'Then you think she should go back?'

He sighed. 'I don't know. Maybe not. I think it was an unhealthy relationship and a static one. They are probably better apart if they can survive. But I don't know if John can.'

The conversation continued and eventually petered out on the subject of John. Jane felt exhausted by the fact of their discussion and the import of what they had said. She was also aware of huge gaps in what they had admitted about themselves, like holes in wire-netting. Later that night, when they were in bed, she said tentatively, 'I'm glad we've talked. We always could and I was afraid it had gone.'

But Dino was nearly asleep. 'Of course we can still talk,' he muttered into his pillow, and caressed her briefly with one arm. 'Go to sleep, Janey.'

He was soon—with surprising speed, Jane felt—breathing regularly, while she gazed into the absolute void that is unshared darkness. The subject, however difficult to mention before, was now impossible.

HER POSITION, SHE decided, was ridiculous, in that it was no position at all. She was a prisoner of her own imagination and had carefully created for herself the circular hell in which she moved. Passing a pet-shop in which mice ran round a wheel she felt a shock of recognition, as if she had looked unexpectedly into a mirror. Like the mice, she could stop her wheel at times: Dino loved her, needed her, sincerely regretted the past. Otherwise it spun and spun while she raced frantically round: in four years of marriage four betrayals *that she knew of*, therefore only the blindest of fools could believe it would never happen again in the rest of their lives.

She tried to test her own reactions. Presuming that it happened, would she prefer to know or be ignorant? To be ignorant was to sway between confidence and doubt, while to know was the end of doubt but the beginning of . . . what? She had no answer to that. It was more than a door closing; it was a steel grid sliding swiftly into position. This, then, was what she should have got clear the last time: if it ever happens again . . . But what? Smartly and with precision, the grid snapped back into place.

It was all very unreal, not like her own life at all. She remembered items she had read about various psychological states, questions in books of character analysis. 'Do you ever feel that you are alone in the world?'—'Quite often.' 'Do you ever feel you are dreaming and may wake up?'—'Yes, I do.' Unfortunately she no longer had the answers to explain her responses.

It was all in her imagination, but that did not make it any less painful than a broken arm. Normal life continued, like a joke. They ate, drank, slept, talked, made love; they went out and they entertained friends. Milk and papers were

delivered. Jane did the shopping twice and the washing once a week; Dino continued to make a comedy picture.

She could say nothing because nothing had happened. He had been justly angry when her silence accused him and she dared not repeat such an episode.

One evening the phone rang while she was still alone. It was Dino's agent.

'No, he's not here yet,' she said, trying to keep her voice neutral. The phone had made her jump after nearly three-quarters of an hour spent watching the clock.

'I waited particularly,' said Max, aggrieved. 'I thought he would be home already.'

'Yes; he's late tonight.'

'Well, it's important, tell him. A TV series. Get him to phone me, Jane, will you?'

'Yes, of course.'

'And how are you? It's too long since I saw you.'

'Oh, I'm fine.'

Max talked on, polite and complimentary. He was never too busy, Jane reflected, to be gracious, when he had nothing to gain. It was a characteristic that fascinated her. 'When I get married next time,' he said finally, 'we must make a four for bridge again.'

Jane laughed. 'Oh Max, really. Have you found a new wife yet?'

'Not yet, but I am always hopeful.' Then he switched back to business. 'You won't forget now? Don't let my hard work be wasted.'

She hung up and made a note of the call. In her present state of mind anything could be forgotten. Barely ten minutes later the phone rang again.

'Jane?'

'Dino.' It was hard not to pounce. 'Where are you?'

'I'm with John, at his flat. I couldn't phone before, he's been in such a state. I'm sorry.'

'It's all right.'

'Well, I don't know what time I shall be home. I can't

talk much; John's in the bedroom. But he wants me to go to see Lisa for him. She won't let him in; he's tried twice and she tears up his letters and sends them back.'

'Can't he phone her?'

'That's just it; he does, all the time. That's what makes it so bad, I think. It's neither finished nor beginning again.'

'Yes, I see. You will be back some time tonight, though, won't you? I mean,' she said hurriedly, 'John won't want you to stay the night?'

'Oh God, no. If it comes to that I shall put him in the car and bring him with me. But I'm rather hoping I can persuade Lisa to take him in.'

'All right. I'll expect you when I see you.'

'Bless you. I love you, Jane.'

'I love you, too.'

They hung up, but the temptation was unbearable. He could have been phoning from anywhere. After five minutes she gave in to it and rang back. He answered almost immediately.

'Dino, I forgot. Max phoned, about a TV part. He seemed quite excited. It's a series, he said.' She was trembling.

'Oh, good. I'll phone him as soon as I can.'

She put the phone down. It had proved nothing. John had a crush on him, Lisa had said. They could be hunting women together, fellow-conspirators with a plausible story.

She hated herself.

She stayed up till one, then went to bed with a book. After half an hour, the print was waltzing across the page, so she gave it up and put out the light. Then she lay there and looked at the dark. After a while she got up and poured herself a stiff whisky, a double.

At two-thirty, when she was back in bed, Dino came in. He moved very quietly, so she said, 'I'm not asleep. You can put the light on.'

'It's all right, I don't need it.' He sat on the bed and took hold of her hand. 'I'm sorry I'm so late.'

'You're frozen.'

'Yes, it was a long, cold drive. I must get the heater fixed.' He kissed her hand. 'It's good to be home, Janey.'

'Well,' she said. 'You haven't told me how you got on. Did you persuade her to take him back?'

'No.' He sounded very despondent and her heart melted in pity and self-accusation. 'I'm afraid not.'

'I'm sorry. All that trouble for nothing.'

She felt him shrug. 'Perhaps it's for the best. Now that I've heard Lisa's side I think maybe they're better apart. The trouble is, I feel most sorry for the one I am with at the time. When I left Lisa I had to go back to tell John the result and he took it badly. It's very uncomfortable being caught between them.'

'Never mind, you've done your best. Let them work it out for themselves.'

He said vaguely, 'I suppose so. But I wish people weren't so destructive.'

'What d'you mean?'

'They are two nice people who ruin each other. It's so unnecessary.'

'You can't help that.'

'I know. But with your friends you have to try.'

IT WAS THEIR last serious conversation. The next few days were full of work and triviality. And then she saw the photograph.

After this it was impossible, at least, to disbelieve in coincidence. She was on her way to visit her parents and at the station she bought a paper, not the one which was delivered but a rather more sensational one that she knew Dino would despise. It was a chance to indulge herself.

Even so she might have missed the photograph because it was not important enough to be in a prominent position. She had in fact been reading for a few minutes and was beginning to skim through the pages again when she saw it. She only stopped to examine it more closely because something about the man's profile reminded her of Dino.

It was Dino, and the girl with him was very beautiful, with long dark hair and a soft mouth and large eyes. The eyes struck Jane particularly, because the expression in them was so clear. The photographer, presumably a man, had made the girl the focus of the shot and it was quite obvious that the girl adored Dino. His expression, being in profile, was rather more hard to read.

The caption said, 'A night out for actor Dino Lewis and lovely Italian starlet Annamaria Carelli.'

She stared at the picture very hard and read the caption over and over again as if it were something difficult that she had to memorize. Her heart was beating very fast, but otherwise she had no noticeable physical sensations. It seemed that she was launched upon an ordeal for which she had trained and prepared over a long period of time.

Dino had not been more than an hour late any evening that week since the incident with John and Lisa, so the photograph obviously referred to that night and exploded his

alibi. She thought how carefully he had manufactured it and followed it through. Did John and Lisa find it amusing? Perhaps it was only the first of many such evenings, the herald of a long-term plan. She went on looking at the picture and the print while her brain worked steadily. Her train to London came and went. She had the idea that it was important to remain calm, but luckily this seemed quite easy. After living with impending catastrophe for so long she almost welcomed its arrival.

Presently she walked carefully out of the station, bought some cigarettes and took a taxi home. She smoked in the taxi but was sufficiently in command of herself not to give the man more than a scrupulous ten per cent for the tip.

She let herself into the house and without any sense of melodrama began to pack. She took as much useful, basic stuff as she thought she could carry comfortably, and when it was all packed she phoned for another taxi. She smoked constantly and had to go round the bedroom, bathroom and living-room, making sure there were no lighted stumps left. She suspected she had lit more cigarettes than she had actually smoked, because while she was packing she seemed to keep losing her current cigarette.

The paper she left, appropriately folded, on the kitchen table. It seemed more eloquent than a letter, and less trite.

There was only one really bad time and that was while she was waiting for the taxi. She found she could not wait in the living-room, so she went into the hall and opened the front door so that she could watch for the comforting black shape coming up the lane. When it came, the man helped her with her luggage.

She caught the next train to London and finished her packet of cigarettes on the journey. While staring out of the window she realized she had made a mistake in forgetting to go to the bank. She must do something about that later. Luckily it was only two days since she had drawn out the week's housekeeping and she had spent very little of it.

She had no plans. She only knew that it had happened

again, she had proof, and she could not endure to stay and watch him lie to her. She could not imagine any conversation they could possibly have upon this subject that they had not had already, and with this result. To stay was to accept, to go on as she had since the last time, only with her fears intensified, confirmed, the pattern of life triumphantly established.

At the station she booked in at the first cheap hotel she saw. It was about noon. She went straight to her room and drew the curtains, then without unpacking or undressing she got into bed. Her last conscious thought was that nobody in the world knew where she was, before she fell in the most natural and childish way imaginable into the profound sleep of complete exhaustion.

IT WAS DARK when she woke and her watch had stopped. There was a second of confusion before she was thoroughly awake and then it all came back quite quickly. It was like a new illness and she was looking after herself very well. She got up and washed and made up her face more carefully than usual; then she changed her clothes, which were rather crumpled from being slept in. She put on her coat, picked up her bag and went out.

Outside in the street with other people around her she remembered her parents. They had been expecting her. They would have telephoned the house and got no answer. She stood still, to think, while pedestrians surged about her. After a while she knew what to do. She walked till she found a phone-box (it never occurred to her to retrace her steps to the hotel) and rang them. When her father answered she said rapidly, 'Hullo, this is Jane. I'm sorry I couldn't make it today, but something happened. I'm perfectly all right,' and hung up. A nasty and quite unexpected wave of emotion struck her when she heard her father's voice, but she managed to overcome it. It was hard to hang up so quickly, but it was the only way to avoid questions and she did not know yet what answers she wanted to give. While she was in the phone-box she thought that she might as well telephone Moira, too, but she had the wrong change. By the time she had come out and obtained the right change, someone else was in the phone-box.

This gave a chance to think. Her parents would know that she had called from a phone-box but, being unable to contact her, would immediately ring Dino to ask where she was. He would not know but might say anything. They would all realize that she must be in London, but this would scarcely help them. The problem she was trying to solve

(and her brain seemed to be functioning now in a very roundabout way) was whether a telephone call to Moira would make Dino more or less anxious. It was very important that he should be as anxious as possible.

Eventually she went into a restaurant and considered the problem over a steak and salad. She was concentrating very hard and didn't see any of the other diners, although the place was quite full. Regretfully she decided that total silence was most effective—regretfully because she had already broken it and because she lacked the stamina not to break it again. The relief of hearing Moira's voice appeared even more attractive than the satisfaction of making Dino anxious. That's bad, she told herself. No guts, that's your trouble. Then, like an addict who has given himself permission to back-slide, she returned to the phone-box.

It seemed friendly. Once inside it she became more hopeful. After all, Moira was her friend, not Dino's. There was no need for her to mention the phone call to Dino if she were asked not to. Thus encouraging herself, she phoned.

Patrick answered. She was unprepared for this and hesitated before saying, 'Can I speak to Moira?'

'Jane? Is that Jane?'

She said, 'Yes,' reluctantly.

'In God's name where are you? Dino's nearly off his head.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Jane—'

'Don't exaggerate, Patrick; just let me speak to Moira.' His agitation made her feel doubly in command, and cynical at the apparent proof of two dubious husbands in alliance.

'Where are you?' he said again, very indignant, as though he were being personally insulted.

Jane smiled at her reflection in the phone-box mirror and said, 'I shall count ten and if—' but Moira's voice, very breathless, cut suddenly into her sentence.

'Jane. Are you all right?'

'Yes, I'm fine.'

'Oh, what a relief! We've all been so worried. You've just missed Dino; he's just gone home. Jane, what *is* going on?'

'Didn't he tell you?' This was interesting.

'Tell me what? He just said you weren't at home and he was worried about you.'

Jane said carefully, 'But he knew I was visiting my parents.'

'Oh, is that where you are?' The relief in her voice was enormous and, almost amusingly, cut short a moment later. 'But he must have phoned them.'

'I doubt it.'

'Why ever not?'

'Well, for one thing he'd be afraid to. And for another they must have phoned him to ask why I didn't turn up.' It was really all going extremely well.

'Jane, will you stop being so mysterious. We've all been very worried.'

'All right,' Jane said. 'Ask Dino about the photograph. That explains everything.'

'Suppose you explain everything.'

Some of her strength ebbed away at that. Why was Moira so exhausting? 'It's a photograph,' she said, finding difficulty in forming the words, 'of Dino and his latest girlfriend. In the paper. The paper's a rag, but it's quite a good photograph. Especially of her.' She swallowed. Her face looked suddenly a bit lop-sided in the mirror and she wondered how it managed it. 'Does that explain everything?' she added, more fluently.

There was a moment's silence and then she heard Moira breathe heavily out. The fat one, Dino had called her, before he knew her well. She said quickly, 'Jane, please come home.'

'Home?'

'Please, Jane. Dino is really worried. If you're trying to punish him you've succeeded, with room to spare. I've never seen anyone in such a state.'

'I'm missing all the fun,' Jane said slowly. While they

talked, the photograph had reformed, very clear in her mind, for the first time since she had slept. It was, up to a point, a help.

'Say what you like but come home,' Moira urged. 'You've done enough to him. Believe me, I've seen him.'

Jane was surprised. 'But Moira, don't you understand? This means—'

Moira cut in. 'Whatever it means or doesn't mean, come home and discuss it.'

'You must be joking,' Jane said, her voice very light and clear. 'This isn't a new subject. We have in the past had one or two discussions and this—' she banged, to her own amazement, on the phone-box as she spoke—'is where they end up. And you suggest another one. I rang you up to *help* me . . .' She stopped because her voice was faintly starting to shake. She took several deep breaths: wasn't that what some people did for stage-fright? And this was, in its way, a form of stage-fright.

Another silence, longer this time. Finally Moira said, 'All right, love. What do you want me to do?'

Jane smelt a trap. 'First of all,' she said warily, 'I want you to promise not to mention this phone call to Dino and stop Patrick mentioning it.'

'I'm sorry, I can't do that.'

'Oh. Fine friend you are.'

'Say what you like. I'm thinking of both of you and this is ridiculous.'

'You don't know a thing about it, Moira. It's never happened to you.'

'I know. And you haven't seen Dino the way he is at present.'

'You, too. The Dino Lewis intimate fan club gains a new member. It's obviously silly to ask you to cash a cheque for me . . .'

'If it's to stay away on, yes. But if you're stranded and want to get back we'll fetch you. Just tell me where you are.'

'Oh no,' said Jane. 'I'm not falling for that one. You'll tell Dino.'

'Well, naturally I'll tell Dino. We're not playing hide and seek.' She was speaking quite sharply, like a teacher or welfare worker at the end of her patience.

'No, Moira,' Jane said coldly. 'We're not. You're quite right. I've left him. Just tell Dino that, will you? I've left him for good.'

And then she knew that she really had. Her knees sagged as she put down the phone and she had to crouch on the floor while she was very, very sick. As soon as she could she crept out and slunk away, overcome with shame. She had defiled a public call-box.

SHE HAD GONE to sleep at last and was dreaming complicatedly about Moira when the knocking woke her. She listened to it, puzzled, for a few seconds before saying, 'Who's that?'

'Dino.'

'What?' She heard her voice crack in surprise.

'Let me in, Jane.'

'No.' Her back crawled with fear. 'Go away.'

His voice was very quiet and controlled. 'If you don't let me in I shall wake everyone up. I shall create a disturbance.'

'Go away.'

'I mean it. I'm not playing.'

Defeated by the threat of a scene, she got up and unlocked the door, then returned to bed. He came in at once, but not quickly. There was a quality of stillness about him as if he had decided she was a timid animal that might be frightened by sudden movement.

'May I put on the light?'

'No. It's enough to listen to your lies. I don't have to watch as well.'

'I am not going to tell any lies.'

'That's the first one.' She was sitting up in bed, her hands clasped firmly round her knees.

'Jane, will you listen to me?'

'I haven't much choice. They should never have let you in. Was the night porter a woman?'

'Please don't. I had to get to you.'

'How did you manage it?' She could not restrain her curiosity.

'Well, I started at Victoria, naturally, and worked my way round the hotels.'

'How clever of you. What time is it?'

'About four.' His voice was gentle, but he sounded very tired.

'Well, say what you want to say and get out.' She closed her eyes; even his silhouette, which she could now see dimly, seemed dangerously persuasive.

There was a pause, then he said, 'It's not what you think.'

'That's a very poor script.'

'I had a cup of coffee with her last night as one Italian to another.'

'Oh yes. After spending half the night with her last Friday.'

'Last Friday? But you know I was—'

'—with Lisa, yes. I know the story you told me. And I don't believe it.'

'Jane, it's the truth.'

She sighed. 'This is corny, isn't it? Don't you find it embarrassing?'

'How can I make you believe me?'

'You can't.'

She could vaguely see him moving distractedly up and down the room.

'Ring up the paper,' he said finally. 'They'll tell you when the photograph was taken.'

'What's the point? You can pay them to say what you want. You've had time.'

'Do you mean that? Jane—'

'Please go away. It's embarrassing. You can't pull it off this time. I know it must be a shock to you, but there it is.'

'Jane, listen. I had coffee and we talked for half an hour. We shook hands. That's all. I'll swear by anything you like.'

'Well, you're not very religious, are you?' She lit a cigarette, shielding the flame so as not to see his face. It was foolish to undertake too much at once.

'Jane, please—' The despair in his voice was really very convincing.

'No.'

'Jane, this is *us*.'

'No, it isn't.' A hard bit, that. She swallowed and took a breath. 'Not any more.'

'You can't mean that.' Genuine shock.

She made a big effort and aimed carefully. 'I'm not coming back. I can't take any more. It's what they call the last straw.'

'But nothing happened.'

'You're a liar, Dino.'

'Jane, I love you and nothing happened.'

Try again. Once more; you can do it. You are stronger than you think. 'It's all over, Dino.'

A long pause. Very long. She reinforced herself with the photograph, the look in the girl's eyes, and the memory of the last weeks. Every time you have gone back, she told herself, and it has happened again. Can you live like that for the rest of your life?

She couldn't. Not even for another week.

He came nearer. 'Jane, I haven't any pride. I'll do anything. I'm serious. I'll give up acting, do anything you like. I'll get a job where you can watch me all the time if you like.'

'Don't make me despise you.' She was shaking, terrified that he would touch her.

'You'll never have a moment's anxiety, I promise—'

'Promise?'

'Yes.' He ignored, or failed to see, the irony. 'I'll do anything. I love you. I need you, Jane. You can't break us up.'

'You did it yourself, a long time ago.'

'No.' It was a low moan of pain.

'Yes.' She felt violent, vicious with tension. 'Of course you did. Don't crawl to me any more; it doesn't make up for a thing. My God, you don't understand anything. You think a few promises and lies and your magic presence can make everything all right again just like the last time and the next time and the next. Well, you're wrong. I'm not such a bloody fool as you think. I can't stand any more and

I don't have to and I'm not going to; do you understand that ?' She put all her strength and suffering into the final words. 'Now get out.'

There was a long moment while he stood there, a hand to his face, but her courage pulled her through, just. Then he turned round and walked out and the door shut quietly, with a click.

THE DOCTOR PRESCRIBED rest and sedatives, so it was several days before she even knew clearly about her dawn taxi-ride to her parents' house. Every time she woke up she saw her mother's face, smiling encouragingly, and occasionally her father, looking concerned and out of place. She had no appetite and they had to coax her to take nourishing soups and milk and expensive, out-of-season fruit that they remembered she had liked as a child.

She woke up finally, thoroughly, around noon, and looked at her mother sitting as usual in a chair by the bed. 'Hullo,' she said. 'What day is it?'

Her mother smiled. 'Saturday.'

'Gosh,' said Jane, awe-struck.

'Now you're not to worry about anything,' said Mrs Radley, rising and pillow-straightening. 'You're with us and you're all right, thank God, and we'll look after you. You needn't talk if you don't want to, or you can tell me all about it, just as you like.'

'I don't know yet,' Jane said awkwardly. 'Have—have I missed much since I arrived?'

Mrs Radley, after giving a final pat to the pillow, lightly touched her cheek before sitting down again. Her faint and extremely expensive scent lingered around Jane. 'Perhaps that would be best,' she said. 'For me to explain, and save you from asking questions. We've had lots of phone calls—from Dino, and his parents, and Moira, and John Gregory and Lisa Fox—and we've told them all more or less the same thing: that you're exhausted and must rest, and you'll get in touch with them if and when you want to.'

Jane smiled shakily. 'You make me sound like a celebrity.'
'So you are, to us.'

The easy tears overflowed and she brushed them away,

too weak even to feel embarrassed. Open affection from her parents was very demoralizing, but welcome. 'Thank you.' She could find no words for her next question.

'I think we know most of the facts,' said Mrs Radley, reading her face. 'Though not from your angle, of course. That can wait as long as you like.'

Jane put out her hand and her mother held it.

'I'm sorry I've been such a failure,' she said.

'Now you're not to talk like that. That's nonsense and you know it.'

Jane shook her head. 'No. I could give you a list. You know what I mean.'

'Well,' said Mrs Radley, patting her hand, 'we've both made mistakes. Mine are more serious because I'm older and should have known better.'

'You were right,' Jane said dreamily. She felt that she was floating in a cocoon of peace. 'It hasn't worked out.'

'We'll see,' said her mother.

'Oh no, I'm not going back. I mean that.' It was important that they should understand.

'All right.'

Presently her mother went away and her father came in. He stood by her bed and said, 'Well then, how's my best girl?'

Tears again. It was really dreadful to have so little control.

'I know,' he said awkwardly. 'But it's all going to be all right, you'll see. Your mother's gone to get you some lunch. Feeling hungry?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know.'

'Never mind. Doesn't matter. Those chrysanthemums,' he said, looking round, 'are from the garden. Not bad.'

'They're wonderful.'

'Funny thing, they have such a bitter smell.'

'It suits them.'

'Yes. Suppose it does really.' He sat down and began to pack his pipe with tobacco. 'This thing won't bother you, will it?'

'Oh no. I like it.

On Sunday she got up and sat in a chair by the window. The garden was looking its usual autumn self. Mrs Radley said, 'Are you really feeling stronger?'

'Oh yes.'

She opened her bag. 'There's a letter for you, not from Dino. I don't know the writing.'

Jane took it: a round childish scrawl. She tore the envelope and found a brief half-page signed 'Lisa'. She was surprised, illogically, to find that Lisa was vocal rather than literate.

'Dear Jane,

Your a fool, Dinos telling you the truth, he really was with me that night and he hardly knows this girl. Dont be an idiot, even Dino wont wait for ever and your making a fuss about nothing, honestly, Ive got no reason to tell you lies.

Love from
Lisa.'

She handed it to her mother, who read it with an unexpressive face.

'Sounds like a threat,' Jane said.

'I suppose she means well. But it does no good to interfere. This is between the two of you.'

'It's over, Mother. Don't you believe me?'

'I believe that's how you feel at present.'

'I won't change my mind.'

'All right.'

'I don't understand. Do you want me to change my mind?'

'Jane, you're hurt and upset. That's only natural. I just don't want you to make a decision in a hurry or to feel you can't change it if you want to later.'

'It's been going on for years, you know.'

'Yes.'

'He told you?'

'More or less. He blamed himself for everything.'

'Did he? How noble.'

'I'm not making excuses for him, Jane. He's behaved extremely badly. But I do want you to have plenty of time to think before doing anything final. Men are very different from us, you know; they can do these things without involving their emotions.'

'But that's just it. Everyone makes that excuse for them, so they trade on it.' She heard her voice becoming hysterical.

'Well, I may be quite wrong about Dino,' said her mother firmly, 'but I know it's true in very many cases. And there is another thing. It's just possible that not being entirely English has made a difference.'

The following week Mr Lewis arrived without warning and Jane felt compelled to see him out of sheer politeness, though she was sure he was an envoy from Dino and resented him accordingly.

'You poor child,' he said unexpectedly. 'You look worn out. It's good of you to see me.'

'That's all right. I'm feeling better now than I did.'

'Jane, I'm so sorry it's come to this. I feel in a way it's my fault. I should have interfered more. I had my suspicions.'

'Yes.'

'I think you've been very brave to hang on so long. You've done all you could. I wish I'd done more.'

'Please don't. There's no need.'

'No.' He sighed. 'I suppose no one could have made any difference. Have you seen the solicitor yet?'

'Solicitor?'

'Yes. About the divorce.'

'Oh.' It was a considerable physical shock. She tried to be brave, even humorous. 'You're the first person to use the dreaded word.'

'Am I?' He appeared surprised. 'But you did tell Dino you'd never go back to him.'

‘Yes, I did.’

‘Well, a simple separation won’t be much use to either of you, will it? I imagine you’ll want to marry again one day when you’ve got over all this horrible business.’

Jane took a deep breath. ‘You’re very practical.’

‘I’m trying to look ahead. I’m very fond of you, Jane, and I want you to be happy. I had such high hopes for you and Dino. It’s funny how things work out. Naturally my feelings for Dino are the same; he’s still my son, no matter what he’s done. He’s staying with us at the moment, of course; he couldn’t stand the empty house. I suppose he’ll get over it eventually, but his nerves are in a dreadful state right now.’

After he had gone she crouched in her chair and shook with fright. Her mother came in and was quite alarmed.

‘Darling, whatever is it?’

‘Nothing.’ Her teeth chattered. ‘Only I don’t want to see him if he comes again.’

THE ONLY ANSWER, she decided, was complete isolation. It was absurd to exchange constant anxiety for the strain of coping with everyone's partisan feelings. But she was afraid to go away by herself. So she settled for deflecting her parents from discussing her position and encouraging them to block all phone calls. Moira was pretty consistent and John rang up occasionally. She did not speak to them. But Dino did not phone again, or write, and she did not see a solicitor.

She went to bed late, taking pills, and slept half the morning. Breakfast and lunch occupied the rest of it and in the afternoons she helped her mother with varied good works. The evenings she spent with her parents in whatever activities they were engaged in. It was a vegetable existence and very gradually, like new skin across a cut, she could feel her strength growing. It was almost incredible but it was happening. Now that all human contacts were reduced to a minimum, she was soaked through with peace. There was no doubt, no worry, no suspicion. She began to go without the pills and found she could sleep. Her appetite returned and her complexion improved. She was both pleased and frightened by her own resilience.

'But I had to get away,' she told herself. 'I'd have gone mad if I hadn't.' She could not understand why already the full horror was beginning to fade.

'You're looking much better,' her parents said.

'I feel much better. It's all thanks to you for looking after me so well. In fact—' she hesitated—'I don't think I need to be protected from the phone and the post any more.'

'No,' said her mother. 'We realized that some time ago and we're very pleased.'

That told her that what she had somehow unconsciously

expected had not happened. Defensively, though impressing only herself since the thought had been private, she said, 'I think I'll make an appointment with Fredericks,' and caught a quick, unfathomable look passing between her parents. 'Well,' she said quickly. 'Don't you think I should?'

'You must do whatever you think best.'

Mr Fredericks' office was small and cluttered, at the top of a narrow flight of stairs. There were other doors bearing the same name along the corridor. She told him she just wanted to know her legal position and he interrupted her story with sharply relevant questions. He was small and elderly, with spectacles and a smile that came and went suddenly.

'Well, Mrs Lewis,' he said finally, 'I fear you have no legal position as regards divorce, unless there is something you haven't told me. I should certainly have to know a great deal more before proceeding. You see, you have already condoned the other adulteries by resuming marital relations. This adultery can revive the others, but I'm afraid we should require far more proof than a mere photograph in the newspaper. People in your husband's profession are constantly exposed to this kind of thing. Forgive me if I sound a little melodramatic, but have you considered engaging a private investigator?'

'No.' She repeated, 'I only wanted to know my position. I haven't made any decision.'

A quick, kind smile. 'Of course we shall be happy to act for you if necessary.'

'I hope I haven't wasted your time.' She added with difficulty, 'I feel rather silly.'

'Not at all, Mrs Lewis. These are emotional matters, after all. I merely feel that you are allowing your natural indignation over the previous adulteries to force you to the conclusion that this is also a clear-cut case of adultery. Your intuition may tell you that it is and you may very well be right, but legally we must approach the matter far more cautiously,

as I'm sure you appreciate. If your husband had admitted adultery in the presence of a witness, for example, our position would be quite different.'

'You make it sound as if I should never have left him.'

Mr Fredericks spread out his hands apologetically.

'But don't you see I had to get away? Can't you imagine what it was like, waiting and wondering when it would happen again?' It seemed terrifically important that she should make him understand how she had felt, and yet with half her mind she refused to believe that she was actually here, in a dusty office, discussing Dino's adulteries with a stranger.

'Yes, of course,' said Mr Fredericks, with sympathy. 'It must have been most distressing for you. But I'm afraid divorces are not granted because you feel your husband may be going to commit adultery again—' he smiled briefly —'however unfair that may be.'

'DADDY, CAN I talk to you?'

Her father looked up (pleased, surprised?) and put down his book. 'Of course you can.'

She sat down, fiddling with the material of her skirt. 'Do you think I've done the right thing?'

'Yes, I do.'

The instant, positive reply was quite a shock. She stared at him, fascinated by someone who knew his own mind. She waited for him to go on, but he didn't.

'Most people don't,' she said finally.

'That doesn't matter. It's what you feel that counts.'

'Yes.' Silently she begged him, Reassure me; don't assume I'm an adult. 'Why d'you think I'm right?'

'Well . . .' He began to look around for his pipe. 'No woman should have to put up with that kind of thing.'

'No.'

'I don't mind telling you now you've brought the subject up, I'm very disappointed in that young man. I didn't think he was that type at all.' He found his pipe and began to fill it. 'Shows how wrong you can be about people.'

'Yes.'

'But of course you know all about that. Sorry. Tactless of me.'

'It doesn't matter.' Foolish, really, to hope for miracles, and without even knowing properly what miracle she was hoping for. She tried another angle. 'You know Fredericks said I have no case?'

'Yes.'

'Well, what do you think about that?'

He was smoking hard. 'Only a question of time.'

'Oh.' She pushed the thought away. 'You . . . you don't think I should . . . consider giving him another chance?'

All night and the previous night, this one idea had haunted her and seemed not a shock but familiar.

'You'd be mad if you did.' Then he caught the look on her face and said tenderly, 'Look, my dear. How long's it been like this and how many chances has he had? D'you really think one more would make a difference?'

'No.'

'Well, there you are.'

She got up and started to walk round the room. 'He hasn't phoned or written and I've been here a month.'

'Five weeks.'

'Oh. Yes, of course. And he hasn't tried to get in touch with me.'

'Not since you were too ill to talk to anyone.'

'Oh yes, he phoned then. How often, do you know?'

Mr Radley frowned. 'Oh, two or three times.'

'How did he sound?'

'Your mother took the calls. Jane, what is this? You're upsetting yourself and it's foolish. The worst part is over now you've made the break.'

'But you know what Fredericks said.'

'Just because you can't get a divorce at this moment, that's no reason to think about going back.'

She said quickly, 'I'm not.'

'It sounds very much like it to me.'

'No, I'm just wondering how things are.'

'I should think it's pretty obvious as he hasn't got in touch with you.'

'Yes—but I said such awful things to him when he came to the hotel—' she paused for a moment—'and if he phoned after that and I didn't answer . . .

'You were ill.'

'Well, later. Afterwards.' She heard her voice becoming rough.

'And what good would it have done?'

She hesitated. 'Oh—none, I suppose.'

'Well, then.'

She smiled at him and went away. Sitting at the top of the stairs, she tried to think. She did not want to do anything drastic; just to talk to him, see how he was. It was a long time to go without contact. Resting, thinking, talking to people, she had not been aware of the total of time passed, only of each individual day. It had been part of the cure, to live merely in the present.

That night she could not sleep. She kept the light on and chain-smoked, staring at the ceiling. The memory of the last interview in her hotel room made her feel hot and ashamed. Yes, it had served him right; yes, he deserved to suffer, and yet . . . She felt she had broken some fundamental law. And even after that he had telephoned.

You're a fool, she told herself. Nothing has changed. You hurt him badly, but he telephoned because you were ill. That does not make him a faithful husband. The situation remains the same: he has a recurrent fancy for other women, especially those with a sad story to tell, and when he has been unfaithful he tells lies about it. That is why you ran away. You can't mean to run back.

No.

What then? Remain here, the errant daughter, neither married nor divorced? How long will the love and toleration last? Remain here for years, growing older, a fixture, till your parents die and you inherit the house? Or march bravely on, making a new life. What new life? A bed-sitter and a job as a shorthand-typist? She sat up quickly and reached for a fresh cigarette.

Somebody else then? It would help, of course, to start with an empty heart. No, I am not still in love with him, but after all these years there's something, just a habit. It can't be otherwise.

Oh God, I'm frightened. Now steady. What's the time? Ten past three. A bad time. You're getting things out of proportion. But if my father thinks I'm right and my mother isn't sure and Lisa and Moira think I'm a fool and

father-in-law is playing some crafty double-agent game, who can I talk to?

Take a pill, then you won't need to talk, even to yourself. Or, alternatively, take the lot and you won't talk again, to anyone, ever.

Now that is an idea. She got out of bed and went to the dressing-table, rummaged in a drawer. But she caught sight of her face, pale without make-up, large-eyed; thick, straight hair, bed-flattened, lying on her shoulders. You don't want to do it, she said to the mirror. You're a fool; it's the best idea you've had yet.

She got back into bed with an awful sense of being the only person in the world awake. *Think*. This must have happened to millions of women; what do they do? Put up with it or get divorced. But I don't want to do either.

There you are. You've admitted it. So what do you want to do?

I don't know.

Yes, you do. Part of your trouble is you can't be honest with yourself for five seconds. You want to make him different: the same person without this fault so that you can live happily ever after.

I wanted that all along; not so unreasonable.

Maybe not. Just impossible. So it doesn't matter if it's reasonable or not.

But it may not be impossible. This time, he may have learnt—

You know what he's learnt. Your father said it. Only a matter of time. Then you'll have your divorce grounds. Maybe already. Almost certainly already.

But it won't mean anything; it never has.

Now you're using his arguments. You're laughable, do you know that? You came here to get out of your treadmill circle, and look at yourself running: round and round.

In the morning, a bright, cold, autumn morning, it all seemed ridiculous yet haunting, like a bad dream. Mrs

'Yes. But what can I do then, if he won't change? How can I go back?'

'I don't know. But can you afford to stay away?'

'Oh, Mother . . .

'Now, Jane, come on; it's not as bad as that.'

'Isn't it?'

'All right, you have a good cry if you want to. It might make you feel better.'

'No. I don't think so. Mother, I'm going round in circles and that's why I left him: to stop going round in circles. You don't know what it was like, just waiting for it to happen again and not being able to talk about it because it hadn't.'

'I can imagine.'

'Well, how can I go back to that? And you say it won't be any different.'

'Probably not.'

'We were so happy, you see, before. So very, very happy. Even after, for a while. And it's hard to forget. I can't imagine a different kind of life. I don't know what I'm going to do, alone. Oh, I know I can stay here, but you know what I mean.'

'Phone him,' said her mother.

'Should I? Should I really? I don't know what to say. I mean, I don't want to commit myself.'

'Just phone for a talk.'

Jane thought about it. 'It's only ten days till his birthday. Should I phone then? It would give me an excuse.'

'Do you need an excuse?'

'Yes. I think I do. Now.'

After that it was easy to wait. She relapsed into a state of calm excitement. She would take it step by step. Telephone and hear his voice. Ask no foolish questions. Perhaps arrange to meet. To see him again. To see him.

MRS LEWIS ANSWERED, very cold and surprised, and Dino was out. 'It's his birthday today,' she added.

'Yes, I know. That's why I phoned.'

'He is not here. I shall tell him what you said.'

There was a pause while they both merely breathed into the phone.

'You have made my son very unhappy,' said Mrs Lewis.

'He's made me unhappy too.'

Another pause. 'Jane, I begged you to listen and you never listened. You were not properly married. You know that.'

'I'm sorry. That's not how I see it.' It was fantastic, a row with one's mother-in-law in such circumstances.

'It's the truth. Well, I shall tell him. I am going now. Good-bye, Jane.'

She hung up. Jane, amazed and hysterical, put down the purring phone and settled herself to wait. By two the next morning he had not phoned and she dared not disturb the household again. She took a pill and went to bed, heavy with anticlimax.

The following day she considered the problem. There were various interpretations of the facts: he did not wish to contact her, Mrs Lewis had withheld the message, or he had been out all night. All three seemed equally probable and she made her thoughts go so far and no farther with care. She considered calling the studio but decided against it; she did not know whether the film was finished or not. But there were several people who might be able to help her with information: John, Lisa, Moira, Max. No doubt they would be pleased that she was beginning to see sense, as they would call it. Go gently, she reminded herself. Don't ask questions. He must have been lonely.

At eleven the phone rang and she must have assumed he was still filming because she picked it up fully expecting a call for her mother. Her own telephoning seemed very much an evening affair.

'Jane?'

She had forgotten the beauty of his voice and the phone almost fell from her hand. He said her name again.

'Yes.' It was a croak, nearly drowned in her own ears by her wildly beating heart.

'My mother said you phoned.'

She chewed at her cheeks for saliva. 'Yes. Yesterday evening.'

'I'm sorry I was out. How are you?'

'All right. Happy birthday.'

'Thank you.'

He sounded just the same. Not that she had expected him to sound any different. She was going mad. Rapidly, disastrously, gloriously mad.

'How are you?' she said.

'All right.'

She bit her lip. 'Oh Dino . . .

'I telephoned when you were ill,' he said.

'Yes, I know. I was very grateful.' A pause. (This can't go wrong; I won't let it.) 'I'm sorry I haven't phoned before. I've been doing some thinking.' She tried to put a lot into her voice.

'Yes, of course.'

(If he's remembering the hotel room he has a right to be angry.)

'I can't talk on the phone, not properly. Can we meet somewhere, just for a talk?'

'What kind of talk?'

'Just a talk. Oh, Dino,' she said rapidly, 'I've missed you so.' Silence. 'Dino?'

Presently he said, 'I'm sorry, I thought you meant a talk about arranging things.'

She was scared, but rather more puzzled. 'What things?'

He said, 'The divorce.'

It fell with a thud, like an axe into wood. She couldn't speak.

'Jane?'

'Yes,' she said finally.

'You can have your divorce,' he said.

'But . . . I never mentioned it. I never said I wanted one.' Now the words poured from her mouth.

'You said it was all over, and—' he sighed—'I'm sorry, this is difficult for me. Do you want me to remind you of everything that you said?'

'In that awful room? No, I don't. Please forget it. I've been so ashamed. Dino, I want to see you. When can we meet?'

He said slowly, 'I don't know.'

'You've got every right to punish me.' She had not expected to capitulate so quickly but she found it a luxurious surrender. 'But I don't want a divorce. I don't care what you've done. I just want to see you and talk to you.' She started to cry, wonderfully warm tears of relief.

'Please don't say any more.' A sad, anxious voice. 'You'll be so sorry afterwards and I don't want you to be. The position has changed. I'm afraid I really believed what you said. I thought you meant it. And now there is Annamaria.'

Even the name didn't hurt. 'I don't care. It doesn't matter.'

'Jane, I wish there was a gentle way to say this, but Annamaria is going to have a baby.'

Then she lost sense of time. She looked at the phone in her hand and the elegant furniture of her parents' sitting-room, all swimming before her eyes, and presently she heard herself saying monotonously, 'No, no, no, no . . .'

'Please stop crying.'

She went on. The tears and the denial just poured from her and took no strength at all.

'Please, Jane.'

Presently she dredged up all her self-control and said, 'Are you sure?' It seemed such a silly and inadequate remark.

He said, 'Practically. She's having a test.'

'But . . . you're so careful.' It was a cry of imploring disbelief.

'I'm sorry, it's hard to explain.'

'Oh.' She gasped for breath. 'She's one of those Catholics, is she? It's a pity that didn't stop her—oh, Dino.' She was lost again.

'Please don't.'

When she surfaced she said, 'Am I embarrassing you?'

'Don't, Jane. I'm so sorry. I thought it would be hard to say, but not like this. I really thought it was all over.'

She heard herself saying, 'But you've had so many chances, Dino. Do I only get one?'

He said again, 'I'm sorry.'

A pause. She blew her nose, wiped her eyes, looked away from her appalling reflection and said, 'I want to see you.'

'I don't think we should meet.'

'Why not? Afraid of spoiling the case?'

'It's not that. I think it would be upsetting for both of us.'

Both of us. That signalled hope. She lit a cigarette to give herself courage. 'I must see you.'

'No, Jane.'

'I won't do anything unless I see you. Ever.' Even to herself it sounded theatrical, as the truth often does.

He said eventually, 'All right. I'm at John's flat. I'll wait for you.'

'Is he out?'

'He's with Lisa.'

'Oh—so you did succeed.' It seemed important to talk of other things if she could.

'I don't know. It's a long story. I'll see you here, then.'

'Yes, I'll be quick.'

'It doesn't matter. Jane—this situation is fixed. It can't be changed.'

She couldn't answer that so she said, 'See you,' and put down the phone.

A terrifying sight in the bathroom mirror. She set to work; she had never had such an incentive before. It took her fully half an hour to restore her face to something like normality, and nothing would disguise the redness of the eyes and their puffy lids completely. She did her best with 'make-up' after prolonged attack in cold water. She put on a dress he had always liked and the suede coat he had bought her with some of the first film money. She brushed her hair, luckily looking good and recently washed. She sprayed herself freely with the scent she had lacked the courage to use for the past weeks and she was ready.

The taxi arrived quickly and she was glad to leave the empty house.

SHE RANG THE door-bell and waited. When she heard his footsteps coming she felt faint. The door opened and they looked at each other.

'Hullo, Jane. Come in.'

She was sure that she hadn't imagined the look in his eyes, but it vanished so quickly. She couldn't move but stood there greedily taking in every beloved, familiar detail. She said, 'Dino,' very softly, as if his name alone could work magic.

'Please come in.' He was standing well back, half behind the door and looking at a point somewhere above her shoulder. She could hardly have thrown herself into his arms if she had wanted to, and she wanted to.

She followed him up the stairs and into John's living-room.

'Coffee or something stronger?' he asked.

'Something stronger.'

He gave her whisky.

'Cigarette?'

'Thank you.'

He had to light it for her and she was clumsy, steadying herself by touching his hand with her fingers. She felt his hand shake and immediately all the futility of the situation and their good manners overwhelmed her and she said, 'You still feel the same.'

He shook his head and lit his own cigarette.

'You still feel something. I could tell.'

'Yes, I still feel something.' He was very grave. 'Is that so surprising? After six years.' He sat down in a chair opposite her sofa.

She said eagerly, 'Then all this is pointless. It's crazy, when we both feel like this.'

'No, it's not crazy. Jane, I told you on the phone, the situation is fixed.'

She grabbed a straw. 'What if she's not pregnant? Wouldn't that change things?'

'She is.'

'You can't be sure; you said she was having a test. There's hardly been time—' She broke off.

'So now you believe I was telling the truth about the photograph.'

She said in a small, surprised voice. 'Yes, I suppose I do.'

'Well, I was, for what that's worth. But it didn't last long, as you realize. After you . . . went away there didn't seem much point . . . and it turned out that Annamaria was already in love with me, which made a difference.'

'I knew that.'

'Did you? Strange, I didn't.'

'I knew from the photograph. I could see it in her eyes.'

The situation seemed more bizarre than ever: to be sitting in John's sparsely furnished living-room and showing polite interest in the fact that she had known and he had not known that Annamaria was in love with him the day they were photographed together drinking coffee.

She said, 'Dino, I just can't believe this is happening to us.'

There was a strained look about his face. 'It isn't.'

'What do you mean?'

'This is a situation. You have just heard about it. Nothing is happening.'

'Dino, I don't understand. You admit you feel something and you know what I feel. Surely there's no situation we can't change if we want to?'

He shook his head.

'But Dino—' she was swept irresistibly on by looking at him and remembering—'we used to be so strong.'

He looked at her then, really looked, and instead of melting, his expression hardened. 'The last time we talked,'

he said, 'you found the dialogue embarrassing. Corny, I think you said. Perhaps what I'm saying this time isn't any better, but I mean it now just as I meant it before.'

'Dino, please don't go on about that time. I can't bear to think about it.'

'I hadn't finished. I wanted to explain something to you. We don't exist any more. There is no such person as us.'

She was stunned as if he had slapped her. 'That isn't true.'

He said quietly, 'Yes, it's true.'

After a moment's silence she said, 'All right, I deserve that. I deserve anything for what I said to you that time. I'm terribly ashamed. You can say what you like.'

'No,' he said gently, and she looked up, almost hopeful. 'This isn't retribution. It's just the logical result of what you said. I'm not trying to make you suffer. I couldn't get any lower than I got to you in that room—'

'I know, I know.'

'I relied on us completely and when you took it away I had nothing. I couldn't believe that you would, but you did.'

'But I was so upset. And . . . and all those times when you—weren't *you* doing anything to us?'

'I never denied us.' As she watched she saw his hands beginning to shake. 'Does that sound silly?'

'Oh, please don't.'

'I'm sorry. But I want you to understand. I counted on not being rejected. I thought that was always safe. And it was not the same as being always forgiven.'

'I know,' she whispered. 'I was wrong.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I expect I pushed you too far.'

And then there was silence. Vast, terrifying silence between people who have said everything. She had reached the point where the road ended and there was just a huge emptiness.

'So it doesn't matter,' she said at last, 'whether Annamaria is pregnant or not.'

'In a way, no. Though it is important, of course.'

'Dino, do you love her?'

A hesitation. 'I'm very fond of her indeed.'

'Then it's not the same.'

'I haven't known her for six years.'

Tears, very slow and calm, began to run down her face.

'Dino, please, I do understand and I'll go and I'll divorce you and everything, but please, please will you make love to me just once more?'

She couldn't see his face clearly, but he shook his head.

'Please.'

'I'm sorry, I can't.'

'Don't you want me?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Don't you love me at all?'

'Yes.' Very reluctantly.

'Then why not?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Is it because of her?'

'Not exactly.'

'The baby?'

'No.'

'I'm not trying to trap you, to spoil the divorce. Is that what you're thinking?'

'No.'

'No one need ever know. I promise.'

'Jane, please don't.'

'It would mean such a lot.'

'Don't say any more.'

'I'm begging you.'

'I know. I don't want you to.'

'Please, please tell me why you won't.'

'Oh Jane . . . isn't it obvious? It would be so unbearably sad.'

She was silent, finished. He gave her a handkerchief.

'May I keep it?'

He nodded. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose; took out her compact and powdered her face.

‘Another drink ?’

‘Thank you.’

He poured out the whisky and gave it to her. Their fingers did not touch. Looking at him clearly once again, she saw how tired he was. Perhaps she had never before loved him quite unselfishly but she did now. There was still the ritual of finishing her drink and leaving the flat, but in the sense of words having meaning there was absolutely nothing left to say.

AFTER THAT IT was simple and, because she had suffered to the full extent of her present capacity, painless. The reactions of parents and friends took place beyond a neat glass screen which now enclosed her completely. Some things, such as Phyllis, chanced on a raw nerve, but on the whole she made good progress. 'There are so many formalities,' she told her parents, reporting briefly on her interview with Fredericks. 'He says it will take six to eight months at least; isn't that fantastic? And cost about a hundred pounds. It's amazing the things you don't know about till they happen to you. But he's very pleased with me. He says a lot of his clients are hysterical, and vague about dates. But I'm quite calm and rather good on dates.'

She took sleeping pills at night, her only concession to weakness, and in the days she was gay and worked terribly hard in the house and garden and also became the idol of her mother's welfare colleagues. 'Jane really takes after you, doesn't she?' they said.

After Christmas she watched children's television once a week because Dino's series had begun. He was appearing as one of King Arthur's knights and the costume really suited him.

In the spring her parents took her on a cruise and she read lots of books and sunbathed until she was brown all over. They met several interesting people on the boat and she was very nice to all of them.

THE COURT WAS not bad, any more than the waiting, because everything important had already taken place. Their marriage was not ending here. They had been divorced, finally, in John's flat, just as they had been married the night they first made love in Dino's room. The parent-fraught wedding meant nothing, nor did the lawyer-ridden divorce. She was detached from it all. It was like being present at an inquest on yourself.

Her counsel asked her carefully worded questions to which she answered yes or no. Occasionally she managed a whole sentence. As an ordeal it was mercifully brief and hardly hurt at all.

AND THE PAPERS said, 'Jane Lewis, twenty-five-year-old wife of film and TV actor Dino Lewis, was today granted a decree nisi on the grounds of her thirty-one-year-old husband's misconduct with starlet Annamaria Carelli. The case was undefended.

'Mr and Mrs Lewis had been married for five years. There are no children.'

Part Two

After

'WELL, HOW DOES it feel to be a free woman?' said Hugh.

Jane considered this for as long as she decently could. 'Free, I suppose,' she said eventually.

Hugh smiled. 'Oh well. Ask a silly question . . .' He looked round the room. 'I must say you've got this place looking nice.'

'Thank you.'

'Couldn't stand the old ancestral home any more, eh?'

'That's right.'

He heaved himself to his feet with a sigh. 'Well, I suppose we'd better get going. Don't want to be late for the show, do we?'

He had tickets for a musical. He liked musicals and who was she to stand in the way of his enjoyment? The seats were very good; he must have gone to a lot of trouble to get them. She watched the bright, nondescript young people bounding across the stage and listened to their sharp little voices. The story unfolded itself with slow predictability. You could tell by looking at your watch how many misunderstandings were necessary to get you to the final curtain. They had drinks in the interval.

'Enjoying yourself?' he asked, smiling down at her.

'Yes, very much.'

'That girl's got a pretty good voice.'

'Yes, marvellous.'

'Not a bad figure either.' He gave a slight, apologetic laugh.

'Not at all bad. Maybe you could catch her at the stage door.'

'Now you know I didn't mean that.'

'I was only joking.'

They finished their drinks.

'Have another?'

'Do you think we have time?'

He consulted his watch, rather a handsome affair. 'Just about. Time for a quick one.'

They each had a quick one as the warning bell went.

'Now there's a piece of good timing,' he said with satisfaction. They put down their empty glasses and he led her back to her seat, fingers clamped firmly on her elbow.

Driving back to the flat when the show was over, Jane watched the lights of London winking and the traffic curling round the streets.

'This is such a comfortable car,' she said. She had made this remark before, but it was always successful.

'Not bad for a junior partner, eh?'

'Not bad at all.'

He launched into a rather long explanation of how he had come to choose this particular make and model. Jane let her mind drift away.

'Am I being a bit technical for you?' he was asking when she returned.

'Just a bit.'

'Funny thing, that. Never met the woman yet who really understood about cars. Now my uncle—there's the man to ask. What he doesn't know about cars simply isn't worth knowing, to coin a phrase.'

'Really.'

'He's a wily old bird, too. Damn good at his job. I can learn a lot from him.'

'You're lucky.'

'Yes I am, aren't I? I respect him, you know, a lot more than the old man.'

'Yes.' He always paused for a response, so one had to be made.

'I think it's because he knows such a lot. He's a pretty good judge of character, too. D'you know what he said about you?'

'No.'

'He said you were very brave and co-operative. Those were his exact words.'

'Really.' But she felt the inadequacy of this. 'That was nice of him.'

'Yes, wasn't it? He was dead right, though. Blast!' His hand struck the horn. 'Damn fool! Some of these pedestrians seem to want to get killed.'

'Yes, they do.'

He did drive well. She had to give him that.

At the door of her flat she took out her key and said, 'Well, good-night, Hugh. Thank you for a lovely evening.'

He patted her cheek. 'Thank *you*. Seeing that show with you really made it a night to remember. I'll phone you on Friday.'

'Yes—fine.'

'Good-night, then.' He trotted off down the steps. At the car door he waved before getting in.

Once she was inside the door, weariness swamped her and she could hardly drag herself into the kitchenette to make a milk drink. With her hand on the bottle she changed her mind and went through into the tiny living-room for whisky instead. She lit a cigarette and turned on the wireless for late-night music.

So why do I do it? Well, he's polite and he keeps his distance. He called on my parents and me very faithfully during the waiting period and behaved most discreetly, of course, through the vital three months. He's been *there*. I hardly remember, but we probably danced together at the Young Conservatives when we were teenagers. That practically makes us old friends.

At least he's not partisan. He wasn't around a year ago; he doesn't know anything, however much he may think he knows. He won't be watching for signs because he couldn't recognize them. So with him I can be dead and he won't even notice.

QUITE QUICKLY A pattern emerged; she was surprised. A tribute to human adaptability, no doubt, or unpleasant evidence of the tendency to habit in all things.

The mornings were busy with sleep till a civilized hour, then shopping for the day, then lunch before setting off for work, afternoons only, Monday to Friday, in the dry and elderly office her father had found for her. A job she acquired for herself had not lasted long, so sharp was her terror that the young girls' knowledge and curiosity would connect the name Lewis and a recent divorce. It was better to be where all facts were known and scrupulously avoided. After a refresher course she had even become quite a passable typist.

The evenings were harder to manipulate, but there were only four of them, to start with, because on Fridays she went to her parents until late Sunday night. Quite a lot of time could be occupied with bathing and washing her hair, and at least once a week she went out with Hugh. The other evenings she spent at the cinema. Once she saw a film of Dino's and the resulting pain was wonderful, after she got over the fear that she would faint and call attention to herself, because it reminded her how it felt to be alive. Basically, though, she told herself afterwards, it was a stupid move, a horrible piece of self-indulgence which she would regret. She didn't regret it but she suffered for it with pills and dreams, whisky and headaches. It set her back and she scolded herself: Now how can nice Doctor Time help you if you don't co-operate?

Financially she managed quite well. There was her share of the income from letting the house, and her alimony, and her weekly wages, and her father's allowance, which he insisted on giving her. She had tried to be noble about it,

but he had overruled her. 'Nonsense. It isn't much but it will make all the difference between scraping along and being comfortable.' It did. Although her outgoings were in theory only the rent and heating of the flat and the support of herself and the telephone from Monday to Friday, she found in practice that she had become extravagant. She only liked good food, not snacks, and was interested in what she ate. It was important not to run out of cigarettes or liquor. And because she was unhappy she needed a lot of new clothes and entertainment.

At weekends she entered fully into her parents' social life. The past was not referred to unless she mentioned it and she did not. They had always been practical and she assumed they felt it pointless to discuss something that was so obviously at an end. She could not help feeling that the present forced normality of her relationship with them was a denial of previous closeness, though she knew perfectly well that life could not be continued at such a pitch. She would not have wanted it to be and yet she resented the change.

Moirra telephoned occasionally, but conversation was difficult as Jane had not seen her for over a year. It was awkward for her to come to London with the children and Jane could not bring herself to face Surrey again even with other people living in the house. But she clung to the phone calls, however unsatisfactory, because she felt that to lose touch with Moira would leave her without a friend in the world. She had heard nothing from Lisa since ignoring her letter, but had telephoned once to make sure that she was still in the same flat in case (she had no idea why) she ever needed to get in touch with her. She hung up when Lisa answered.

Hugh had said and Mr Fredericks had said and various sympathetic people had said that the last year would pass or must have passed slowly. She agreed because it was easier than explaining that it had in fact been the fastest year of her life. She had begged it to crawl and it had gaily skipped along. It had been like trying to stop an escalator with her

bare hands. She could not, in spite of everything, control the maniac part of her that felt there might still be a chance, so long as nothing was final, just the smallest of chances. This was stupid because she knew there was no chance.

On Sundays and some Saturdays she went, very well wrapped up, for a drive with Hugh. Once he took her to see his old school where he now had a nephew, and she remembered a conversation, long ago, about school. Once they visited a great-aunt, who was very charming and completely deaf so that everything had to be shouted into a hearing-aid which she obligingly switched on as soon as they had finished speaking. This gave them something to laugh about on the way home. Usually they simply went for a drive in the country and had tea in oak-beamed places. Hugh talked about the car and his childhood and his wonderful prospects in the family firm. Sometimes he asked her if she was enjoying herself and she soon learnt to reassure him in advance.

ON THE TELEPHONE Hugh was (pleasantly) indignant. 'But you promised. You can't escape my clutches so easily. If you've got another date you'll just have to break it, that's all.'

'I just forgot,' she said.

'You promised to come.'

'Yes.' It was more than likely in one of her many acquiescent stupors.

'You can't forget Bonfire Night.'

'No.'

'You'll enjoy it,' he assured her. 'We make it a real gathering of the clan. I'll pick you up about seven.'

As she dressed, climbing wearily into thick sweaters, slacks and boots, she thought what a classic case of Freudian forgetfulness it was. Six years of Bonfire Night behind her, a private festival, with fireworks taken out of paper bags and their names read in the glare of matches or sparklers held in the gloved hand; the air damp and cloudy, filled with the unforgettable smell, and rockets (bigger each year) for the grand finale, standing ready in dead champagne bottles.

She couldn't go.

Sternly, because it was really necessary, she took herself over to the mirror. You are going. It will do you good. It's all part of the cure. You'll never get your diploma at this rate, will you? And anyway other people also make phone calls and drive cars and smoke cigarettes and breathe, so why all the fuss about a few fireworks?

At five to seven she caught herself with her hand on the whisky bottle. And you can lay off that, too, she told herself. That's night-caps only and well you know it. She was getting quite used to the sound of her own voice and found it soothing.

The bonfire was enormous. At the top of it a huge, ugly guy was fixed in position. Jane stared at it, wishing she did not find them all so sinister. She forgot herself sufficiently to say as much to Hugh.

'Why sinister? I think it's a jolly fine one myself.'

'Yes, it is.'

'Well, then.' He peered at her face. 'It won't feel anything, you know. It's not *alive*.' He laughed, but she couldn't join in. 'My word, you need cheering up tonight. Good job I made you come. Now you tell me what's wrong with a guy. The children love it.'

'I don't know.' She wished she had never made the remark. 'It's like clowns. Or monkeys.'

'Clowns or monkeys? Oh, I'm afraid you're too clever for me.'

She wanted to scream.

All around them the Fredericks children from various branches of the family were running, scattering bangers and jumping jacks and darting back to safety to watch the effect. She tried to keep control, but when one came really near and behind her she swerved sharply away and almost fell against Hugh. He held her a moment before straightening her up. 'That's better. More friendly.'

'Can I have a cigarette?'

He squinted at her in the lighter flame. 'Are you all right? I think young Rodney was responsible—I could give him a broadside if you like.'

'No, of course not. I'm perfectly all right.'

'They just get over-excited, you know,' he said, sounding every inch the indulgent uncle. 'Mustn't spoil their fun. It's the kids' show, really. We put it on for them.'

A great deal of money had obviously been spent on the fireworks. The bonfire was already burning when they arrived and the children running wild with bangers and sparklers, but all other types of fireworks were reserved for the great display. Punctually at eight the senior members of the Fredericks clan lit up a barrage of fireworks artistically

arranged on the wall and trellis-work at the back of the garden. There was so much that it was impossible to see the whole of it if you concentrated for a second on any particular effect. They could, Jane thought, have legitimately issued tickets for it. Her reaction was swift. Unfair: it's not their fault.

The glare lit up the whole garden and she could see Hugh's face. He looked proud.

'Not bad, eh?' he said, when he caught her looking at him.

'Wonderful.'

He squeezed her arm. 'Glad you came?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Knew you'd enjoy it,' he said, nodding with satisfaction.

She was dazzled by the shapes and colours, and longed to separate them, to linger over each one and give it the attention it deserved. The Catherine wheels whisked merrily round, their pins obviously in exactly the right position. No dangerous rush to make adjustments while the darts of fire spat out from the angrily static wheel. The Roman candles burned steady and true, emitting regular showers of stars. Others she did not know by name sent up their different coloured lights, their mild eruptions, their surprise bursts of flame when seemingly dead. She was absorbed.

'There goes your friend the guy,' said Hugh. She turned her head and saw the fire had reached him. She shut her eyes; the name clicked into place, another fact carefully dug up from its grave. Guy Fawkes. Guido. She looked away sharply, upwards at the rockets, just as Hugh said, 'There they go. Look.' Seeing them through tears made the bursting stars seem larger.

Afterwards there was a supper in which any chestnuts and potatoes not completely charred could be included. The younger children were tired and fractious, the party over. The older ones, well-behaved, played boss, twice as tough as their parents. They reminded her of Moira's children. There was punch for the adults and ginger beer for the

children. All the Fredericks were very kind to her and Hugh looked on with proprietary interest.

On the way home in the car she was quiet, preoccupied. Now careful. You can't just use people. They do have feelings, even people like Hugh. And you have no right to feel superior any more. So just watch what you're doing.

He was quiet, too, which struck her, when she surfaced, as unusual and therefore alarming. She started to make conversation and found him answering in monosyllables. The reversal of roles frightened her.

Outside her door he said, 'May I come up for a night-cap?'

He had never asked before and she had never invited him. Now she panicked. 'I'm sorry, Hugh. I've got a terrible headache.' All the years the human race had existed and women still used that one.

He accepted it without a murmur. 'I'm sorry to hear that. Too many bangs, d'you think?'

'I expect so. But it was a wonderful show.' She was eager to make amends.

'Glad you enjoyed it. I'll phone you then, usual time.' He patted her cheek.

'Yes. Good-night, Hugh.'

'Good-night, Jane.' A hesitation and she wondered whatever was coming. 'Glad you came tonight. Sleep tight.'

Inside the flat, with her back against the door, she relaxed. He was only a human being after all. So why did she see him half as stuffed shirt, half as fumbling seducer? Ridiculous. She addressed her reflection in the hall mirror: 'Don't flatter yourself.'

A BAD DAY. She woke at nine, having fallen asleep at four, and her head, though aching, was clear. She looked at the small room with its narrow bed and said aloud, not feeling ridiculous, 'What the hell am I doing here?'

She sat up and reached for a cigarette. The room was pleasantly decorated, nothing objectionable. The rest of the flat, though cramped, was equally harmless. The old lady below would pass the time of day in the hall and the girl above sometimes welcomed an audience for her deliberations on how far she should let her boy-friend go. There was a garden that the tenants shared and into which the next-door cat sometimes came. At night you could hardly hear the traffic.

So here I am, she thought. What they call a bachelor girl. And here I can stay, as far as anyone cares, for a thousand years, so long as I pay my rent. This is what I chose to do to myself.

Oh, of course my parents are concerned. But they've done all they can. I kept up a pretty good front while I was with them. Is that why I left—so I could wallow in self-pity?

She tried to be honest. No one else was in a position to tell her the truth. It was not quite self-pity: at least, it was part self-pity and part something else. A sense of time passing and nothing to show for it. Looking down an endless narrow corridor that was the future.

'You know your trouble?' she said to the dressing-table mirror. 'You have no interests. You've never had any.' The face, stupidly young and unmarked, stared back at her, smoking its cigarette. 'You can do anything you want but you don't want to do anything except the one thing you can't do. You're like a child in a fairy story.'

She got out of bed, stubbed out her cigarette and went to

make a cup of coffee in the kitchenette. It was so tidy. There was nobody to make it otherwise. While the coffee was percolating she went into the bathroom. That, too, was the same. No shaving brush full of lather or toothpaste without its cap. 'Steady now,' she said to her steamy reflection. 'Don't make a meal of it. You've noticed all these things before. You should be used to it by now.'

In a way she was used to it, yet she still noticed it, just as you can be happy and take it for granted, yet regularly notice your happiness. She went back into the kitchen to rescue the coffee and eat cereal while her toast was under the grill. She saw herself dragging her way through each day, keeping herself washed and dressed and fed and amused—and all for what? All right, how about genuine bachelor girls? How did they feel? Two thoughts sprang forward at her immediately: they believe in the future, perhaps, and they have not thrown away something permanent.

She took the toast, slightly smoking, from the stove and cut off the crusts, swearing as she burned her fingers. She buttered the toast and put marmalade on it. You don't think about him directly very much, she reflected. You avoid certain soaps and scents and you turn off tunes on the wireless faster than light. You haven't a single letter or photograph: they're all at the house locked up, put away, by dear old Moira. You could sit down and use all these things for a flogging and weep yourself dry, but you don't. It wouldn't even help. All that, all the dramatic part, was over last year.

A whole year. Surely there should have been more progress? It wasn't much to report, that you no longer made scenes. It was not even an achievement really, when there was nothing to make scenes about. And she could not play to an empty gallery.

Why then the suffering? Why no more than breaking even with the business of living? She carried him everywhere with her, like an unborn child. Her mind tabled his responses, his jokes, the smell of his skin; the way he moved and the expressions on his face. And her body ached with

memories. To wake in the night and feel no warmth of contact brought a pain so sharp that she almost cried out.

She saw with his eyes. Sometimes, when absorbed in a television programme, she would turn her head, her lips already parted for comment, and disbelieve the empty room. He could only have slipped out for a moment.

She washed up the breakfast things. It was strange how the bad days came, and unpredictable. Why now, today, this any-old-day in November, when she had survived, with a few extra bottles, his birthday and before that the birth of his child and his marriage to Annamaria for which she had patiently watched the papers? Illogical, stupid human beings. Perhaps it just built up, like excess acid. What was it he had said about John and Lisa? 'She is his ulcer.'

Back in the bedroom she made the bed and started work on her face. It seemed to need more effort than it used to. You are twenty-six, she told herself. I don't think you look it. But she wasn't really sure how twenty-six looked.

Applying foundation, she suggested pulling herself together, looking on the bright side, hoping for the best. After all, she pointed out, wielding the powder puff, you are forgetting what you ran away from. You are being unrealistic. Really you know perfectly well that you couldn't stand it any longer.

The unfinished clown's face stared back at her, undeceived. And this, it asked, is better?

HUGH WAS QUITE shocked that she had not yet done any Christmas shopping. 'Not even cards?' he asked.

'Not even cards.'

'All the best ones will be gone, you know.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Well now, let's see.' She could almost hear him thinking, deciding that she must be rescued. 'I'll come and fetch you and we'll do it together.'

'Oh no, there's no need.'

'But I'd like to—and this way you'll have someone to carry your parcels.'

'It's very kind of you but—'

'Right, then; that's settled. I think I can wangle a morning off. Let's make it early in the week to miss the worst of the crowds. Which day do you suggest?'

She gave in. Going round the shops with Hugh brought home to her the realization that she would almost certainly (at some future date) have to buy him a present. She wanted to laugh, then, for no apparent reason.

He followed her faithfully round, standing well back in any departments that could be remotely described as feminine. Jane bought duty presents for relatives, gratefully large presents for her parents, and an expensive, conscience-easing present for Moira. There was something soothing about the spending of money. She wanted to buy presents for herself, lots of them, but with Hugh hovering in the background she couldn't give the matter proper attention, so she postponed it. She seized several packets of cards, almost without looking at them, and the job was done for another year.

'Well, there we are,' she said to Hugh.

'Finished already?' He seemed disappointed.

'Yes.'

'You were very quick.'

'Was I? Oh well, I suppose I knew what I wanted.' That was a real joke.

'Would you like some tea?'

'Yes, I suppose so.' Even though she had been quick she noticed, now that she thought about it, that her feet were tired. 'Well, coffee.'

'I know,' he said impressively. 'It's nearly twelve. Let me take you out to lunch. That would be much more sensible.'

Over lunch, which was very good and the kind she appreciated these days, he said, 'It's amazing how quickly it comes round.'

'What?'

'Christmas.' He looked surprised.

'Oh. Sorry, I wasn't thinking. Yes, it does—much too quickly.'

'Don't you enjoy it?'

'Not any—No, I don't. Maybe it's better if you're religious or have children or something.'

'We always have a big family party,' he said. His face glowed at the memory. 'We put up as many people as we can. We have everything; we make it all absolutely traditional. Presents on the tree and holly and mistletoe and Santa Claus for the children and brandy for the pudding . . .' He went on for a while and she watched him, wondering why she wanted to spit at all these homely joys. Envy or inhumanity? 'But on Christmas Eve we have a small family party just for adults. I wish you'd come.'

She was startled, although after Bonfire Night she should not have been. 'That's very nice of you,' she said, 'but I think I'd be in the way.'

'In the way?'

'Yes.'

'But I'm inviting you.' The piece of meat poised on his fork remained there. 'How could you be in the way? You

won't have far to come; you'll be going home for Christmas, won't you ?'

'Yes, I'll be with my parents.'

'Well then.'

She noticed that many arguments ended like this and it was always a surprise, like your opponent in a race finishing before you because they had given him a shorter bit of the track.

It was hard to argue against. How, in civilized society, did you say to someone who meant well and had been kind to you, 'No, I don't want to,' and expect them to remain unhurt? If you did not leap in quickly with a ready and acceptable excuse, you were finished.

She smiled and said, 'Thank you for asking me. I'd love to come.'

'I MUST GO,' she said.

The party was still going merrily, with abundant alcohol and waves of laughter erupting warmly in all directions. Some exuberant uncles had taken to paper hats, but on the whole the atmosphere was decorously jovial.

Hugh consulted his watch, ignoring the clock on the wall. 'But it's only eleven,' he protested. His face was flushed with drink and the warm room.

She considered excuses and rejected them, having drunk enough to be firm. 'I would like to go now.'

He hesitated a little, studying her militant expression, then threw up his hands. 'All right, sheriff, I give in, I'll go quietly. It's a fair cop.'

'I'll just thank your mother and get my coat.'

Outside as they walked to the car he made noises to show that it was cold. 'Maybe we're going to have a white Christmas after all.'

'Yes.'

'D'you think we are?'

'I don't know.'

He hummed the tune as they got into the car. 'Funny thing, that,' he said.

'What?'

'How tunes get on your brain. Just the right tune for the right occasion. You noticed that?'

'Yes.'

'When I first met you, d'you know what I used to find myself humming?'

'No.'

'"Beautiful Dreamer."' He laughed, pleased. 'Pretty appropriate, eh?' He drove slowly down the drive.

'Is it?' She was only half-concentrating.

'Well, you seem to be in a dream most of the time and you're certainly beautiful.'

'D'you think so?' Her voice was really dispassionate because the remark seemed so odd that she could only feel interested curiosity.

'Well, you know you are.'

Perhaps the magic, once worked, remained. Perhaps it was like baptism for Catholics, a permanent mark, whether necessary or not.

Because she had not answered his compliment he went on talking. 'This is our first Christmas really. Oh, I know I've known you more than a year but I didn't know you *well* last Christmas, did I?'

'No.'

'You were so mysterious. You know—' he laughed at himself—'you rather fascinated me.'

'Did I?' She couldn't imagine it.

'I must have made it pretty obvious.'

'No.'

'Oh.' He considered this. 'Oh, I thought I did. I used to worry about it, in fact. I'm afraid I'm inclined to cross my bridges, you know.'

Alarmed, she made an effort. 'Hugh, I've run out of cigarettes. Could I have one?'

He felt in his pocket, then hesitated. 'I don't know about that. You smoke too much; you're a naughty girl. I've been watching you tonight—oh, not much escapes my eagle eye, whatever you may think.'

She said sharply, 'I'm not ten years old and I want a cigarette.'

'I think you want protecting against yourself.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake.'

'Jane.'

She felt the car slow as he looked at her and she bit her lip with temper and frustration.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Here you are.' And handed her the case from his pocket.

She smoked in silence. Presently he said humbly, 'Have I spoiled our evening?'

The question was enormous and meaningless. She said, 'No, of course not.'

'That's a relief. Look—you don't have to be home like Cinderella, do you?'

'Why?'

'Just an idea I had. I'd like to be the first person to wish you happy Christmas.'

'That's nice of you.' In spite of herself she was touched.

'Well. Where would you like to go?'

'Nowhere. I mean I can't think of anywhere.'

A pause, then he said heavily, 'Well, you could ask me back to your flat for a drink. Just to prove you're not angry with me.'

It was too contrived to be alarming and her guilty conscience encouraged her. 'All right,' she said, 'but remember you're driving.'

He looked outrageously at home in her flat. She poured whisky for them both and sat on the couch opposite him. He didn't drink at first but turned the glass round in his fingers. 'I suppose I ought to thank you really,' he said.

'Whatever for?'

He went on turning the glass. 'Well, for your company. For making this year something . . . rather special.'

She did not want compliments but she wished he did not find them so obviously embarrassing and difficult. She said lightly, 'Thank you, Hugh, that's very nice of you.'

'I mean it.' He held up his glass to her. 'I hope you've enjoyed it too.'

'Yes, of course.' Well, she had certainly needed it.

'That's good.' He got up and began to walk up and down a short length of the already small room. He had drained his glass and she got up, noticing. 'Do you want another drink?'

He caught her arm. 'No, I don't. Not a drink.' His breath

smelt of whisky, but no doubt hers did too. 'I want to kiss you. That's not much to ask, is it? After all it is Christmas. And you're always so damned remote. Well, this is the festive season. You can't be remote now, can you?'

He was clean-shaven and well washed. She had kept him at arm's length for months. It was not worth fighting about. Their faces were so close that she felt she must say something to avoid either breaking away or starting to laugh.

'Happy Christmas,' she said, noticing the time.

His mouth clamped down on hers, not expert but thorough, and, though she remained passive, to her own disgust she felt her traitor body quiver. Was it so long and so bad that any mouth, any hands could do this? Hugh's hands were performing rather violent circular movements on her back. This is ridiculous, she thought. The second person in the world to kiss me. My God.

He came up to breathe and said, incredibly, 'I've been meaning to do that for a long time.' He kept his arms round her so that she couldn't move. 'I suppose I've been a fool to wait all this time but I was afraid of frightening you off. A lot of people might have laughed at me, but I thought you had a few things on your mind.'

It occurred to her that he regarded the past year somewhat in the light of a jail sentence that was now completed. She said rapidly, 'Yes, I have.'

'You can't live in the past, you know.' He looked at her tenderly, reprovingly, and she thought that his face seemed awfully large. She could not remember noticing that about other faces.

'No,' she said, not even wanting to discuss the subject.

He said, 'Jane,' in a thick, presumably passionate voice and plunged forward for another kiss. She resented this very much, proving that she had only intended to allow him one. Perhaps he was hoping to work through the year's arrears. But a hand moving quickly from the back to the front of her dress and working its way downwards while the other remained firmly in control on her spine made it quite

clear what he was hoping for. She jerked backwards as sharply as if he had burned her and there was a moment's undignified struggle before he let her go.

She could not think of a thing to say that would not sound ridiculous, but he had no such difficulty. His face was rather red and full of indignant surprise. 'Hey, Jane, come on. What's the matter? You know the score. We're grown-up people. Now you can't pretend I've rushed you.' Each sentence was punctuated by a sort of grunt with which he tried to elicit agreement.

She had stood well back when he released her and gone to the table for a cigarette. After managing to light it she said inadequately, 'I'm sorry. If that's what you want you're unlucky.'

'You can't make a fool of me for ever, you know. I'm only human.'

'Yes. I'm sorry. That's how I feel.'

'Well!' He looked at her with amazement. 'How about me? Don't I come into this at all? I do have feelings, you know.'

'Yes, of course.'

'Well, don't be so bloody patronizing.' He had never sworn at her before and it seemed oddly shocking. She wondered if at any moment he would start talking about all the money he had spent on her. 'You can't say I haven't waited long enough.'

'No.' She was struck by his strict sense of time and the just reward that must follow a due amount of it.

He wiped his forehead. 'Then what's the matter? I've got a right to know.' He stared at her suspiciously. 'You're not still thinking about *him*, are you?'

'What?'

'You are. My God, you are.'

'Shut up, Hugh, please.' She was surprised by her own firmness and speed. He continued to look at her with an expression of fascinated horror, like a tourist confronted with his first sight of leprosy. She went on quickly, to stop

him speaking, trying to sound more calm. 'You're being ridiculous and you know it. I'm sorry if I'm being unfair but I can't help it. I'm just not in the mood. I don't know if I ever will be.' She tried to smile. 'It's nothing to do with you or the past.' She sought refuge in his own terminology. 'It's just one of those things. You must understand.' She was shaking inside, disturbed by his touch, however clumsy. Her situation struck her, for the first time, as intensely humiliating. However easy she might find it to resist Hugh personally, he had highlighted a very real problem that she had tried to ignore.

He sat down suddenly, his head in his hands, and she felt sorry for him.

'I owe you an apology,' he said.

'That's all right.'

'I've been hoping—' He paused and sighed heavily. He sounded old. 'It was stupid of me.'

'Not at all. It's my fault.' It was her first attempt at rejection and she wanted to show kindness. There was nothing else she could give him.

'I've been so nervous,' he went on. 'I'm not a great hit with women, you know. That's why I drank rather a lot tonight. I wanted to get up my nerve. Sorry. Not what you're used to.'

'Don't be silly.' She wanted badly to throw him off that track.

'All the same though,' he said, looking hard at her, 'you think it over. I'm very fond of you, Jane. I wasn't just . . . trying it on, you know.'

'I know.' But some of his early remarks had made her wonder. She had heard that men regarded divorced women as easy game.

He fumbled in his pocket and drew out a small package. He looked embarrassed. 'Suppose I've spoilt all this now?' His eyes pleaded for contradiction.

'No, of course not, Hugh.' She took it from him.

'Aren't you going to open it? It is Christmas Day.'

‘Yes, of course.’ She hated being watched by the donor while she opened a present. ‘I’ve got yours somewhere—in my bag.’ She fished it out and gave it to him.

‘Oh good. Now it really feels like Christmas.’

She was surprised to see how eagerly he fell upon it. She opened hers while he was occupied and found scent, a well-known brand she had never used. ‘Lovely,’ she said.

He looked up. ‘D’you like it? Are you pleased?’ And she thought sadly that people were children really.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry I wasn’t more original but I thought you wouldn’t mind having another.’

The cigarette-case emerged. It was always a shock to see the present you had chosen unwrapped again.

‘Oh, marvellous,’ he said. ‘Shows you think of me, anyway. I shan’t use the other one any more.’

It reminded her that she would have to use the scent every time she went out with him.

HE HAD APOLOGIZED again when he drove her back to her parents. On Boxing Day he took her out and the subject was carefully avoided by them both, but he surprised her by making no arrangement to meet or phone her. Two days later, however, when she was back in her flat, he rang up, inviting her to spend New Year's Eve with him.

She had vaguely expected this and planned accordingly. Since the Christmas Eve incident, it had been apparent that she would have to take some action over Hugh. Only her self-preoccupation could have blinded her to this fact for so long. Now she contemplated a succession of meetings alternating between advances and apologies, varied by trance-like occasions on which they pretended that nothing had ever happened.

She had considered her approach. 'I don't like New Year's Eve.' A lie was only an abbreviation of the truth. But it would lead to argument and complication; she remembered Bonfire Night and discarded the idea. Another invitation? But he might check; try to come too. She decided to be traditional.

'I'm not feeling well.'

He was instantly sympathetic. 'What's up? Got a touch of Christmas tummy?'

She wanted something more far-reaching. 'I think I'm getting flu.'

He seemed to believe her. She thought how strange it was that most people expected to be told the truth. His life had obviously been so different from hers. He set forth a list of good advice—drinks, pills, warmth and doctors—to which she tried to listen in order to murmur appreciatively at the right times.

When she had hung up she switched on the television

and waited for it to warm up. Now I must do something constructive. I've made a start, attempting to deal with Hugh. She wondered how long it would take to complete the process. It was not pleasant to foresee the intermediate stage of suspicion. Perhaps a letter, carefully worded, would be cleanest of all, though from her point of view it was ludicrously out of proportion. She reached for a pad and began jotting. To her surprise it came easily. 'I'm sorry but I can't see you any more. You have been very kind and deserve better treatment, but I can't provide it, ever. It has been very wrong of me to lean on you so long and take advantage. Naturally you want the relationship to develop, but this is impossible for me. I must see how I get along by myself. I'm sorry I've been so selfish with your friendship.'

She kept it to post later.

MOIRA WAS ON the step when she returned from work. 'Surprise,' she said blankly, even with embarrassment.

'Yes indeed,' said Jane, when she had collected herself. 'But lovely to see you. Come on in.'

In Jane's flat Moira muttered incoherently about short notice and no warning and apologies. 'I knew you'd be working and I thought I might catch you at six. I've got Patrick's mother with us, so I'm practically a free agent.'

'It's lovely to see you,' Jane repeated. 'Will you have a drink?'

'Yes, I will, thanks.'

'Tea, coffee or whisky?'

After a hesitation Moira said, 'Whisky, I think.'

Jane smiled. 'Good for you. Two doubles coming up.'

Moira said suddenly, 'Jane, I just had to see you. I've been so worried. I couldn't ring up in case you said no. I've an idea I remind you of things.'

Jane handed the drink to her. 'That's crazy. Of course you don't.'

'It's well over a year since I've seen you. Oh, I know we've phoned a lot but—'

'No, it isn't the same, is it? It's been my fault entirely. I've been unsociable. But I'm all right now.'

'Are you?'

'Of course. Moira, you look awfully well. And you're thinner, aren't you?'

Moira looked faintly shy. 'Yes, I think so. I've been dieting.'

'What sort of diet is it?'

'Why? You don't need one.'

'No, but I'd like to hear about it.'

Moira seemed nonplussed. Finally she said, 'I didn't really come to talk about diets.'

'No, of course not. I'm sorry. I'm in a flippant mood. Will you have another drink?'

'No, thank you. I haven't finished this one.'

'Oh, sorry. Stupid of me. Well, I think I will.'

Moira studied her. 'I felt . . . I particularly wanted to be with you on New Year's Eve. If you're not going out, I mean.'

'Well, you're lucky. I'm not. I could have had a date with my earnest escort but I've decided to drop him. He thinks I've got flu and I've been composing a farewell letter for the past three days. I finally posted it today.'

'That's Hugh.'

'Yes. He'll get his marching orders in the morning. Not a nice New Year present, but still. It was time I tried to be honest with him. The first of my New Year resolutions.'

'May I know the others?'

'Oh . . .' Jane smiled at her. 'I think it's unlucky. Like telling wishes.'

'Even to an old friend?'

There was a pause before Jane answered. 'Well, they're rather vague, really. Just general up-cheering and doing and going. Something positive.'

'Good,' said Moira faintly.

'Yes, isn't it? I've come to my senses at last. I must have given everyone a real pain with all my moping around. Tell me about you. It's so nice to see you. How are the children?'

'They're fine.'

'Oh, good. And Patrick?'

'He's well.'

'I'm glad. And you look marvellous.'

'Yes, you said.'

Jane laughed. 'Well, you can't have too many compliments, can you?'

Silence spread out between them. Jane lit a cigarette. 'I'm sorry; would you like one?'

'Yes. Thank you.'

They smoked, Moira watching her all the time.

'I'll get supper presently,' Jane said. 'You must be starving.'

Moira said mechanically, 'I should have let you know . . .'

'Oh, please. There's a lot and it's so nice to see you.' She got up.

'Can't we sit and talk a bit longer?'

'You can talk to me in the kitchen.' Jane smiled pleasantly.

'If you're not hungry, I am. And you can't help. It will be a change for you to do nothing.'

'It's a nice flat,' said Moira, watching her preparations.

'Yes, I'm pleased with it.'

'Is that crazy girl still upstairs?'

'Oh yes. She has a new boy-friend now. Same problem though.'

Moira smiled. Jane went on, 'What about your diet? I'm sorry; I was forgetting.'

'Oh, lean meat is all right, and salad. But don't give me any potatoes.'

'Or pudding, I suppose.'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'Can you have soup?'

'I'll have a very little soup. Jane, I wish you weren't so far away.'

'Yes, it would be nice to meet more often.'

Moira looked disappointed. 'Yes.'

'Perhaps I'll move,' Jane said. 'If I was on the edge of south London we could meet more often. But this is convenient for work.'

'Are you going to stay in this job?'

'I expect so. It's very easy and peaceful.'

'You . . . don't want to try anything new?'

'Well, I think I'm a bit old now to find a vocation. If I was really good at anything I'd have found it already.'

She had bought a bottle of wine and they drank it with their meal. While they were eating Moira said, 'Did you have to get rid of Hugh?'

'Why? Don't you approve?'

'I only wondered if it's a good idea.'

Jane refilled her glass. 'It's an excellent idea. Don't you think I can stand on my own feet?'

'I suppose so,' said Moira, in a low, doubtful tone.

'Well, you won't turn my head with flattery.'

'What went wrong?'

'Wrong?'

'With Hugh.'

'Oh, I got tired of him. He was getting a bit pressing.'

'Would it have been no good?'

'Hopeless. You must take my word for it. He's a bore. Anyway, it's time I stopped leaning on him if I'm not going to reward him.'

'Are you sure it's not too soon?'

'For what?'

'Well, too soon to drop him?'

'Moira, you know how long I've been going out with him.'

'That's not what I mean.'

'Oh.' She managed a smile. 'You still think I'm helpless.'

'No. I just mean—well, what will you do if you don't go out with him?'

'Find someone else, I suppose. People do, you know.'

'Yes, of course.'

'Or I may find I'm quite glad not to have to go out with anyone for a while. It gets a bit tedious, trying to say the right things.'

'Yes.'

'Anyway, I don't know yet. I shall see how I get on. New year, new life. Don't you approve?'

'Yes, of course I do.'

'Well then, don't look so depressed. Friends are supposed to be encouraging, aren't they?'

Moira said unexpectedly, 'If we lived somewhere else would you come and stay with us for a while?'

'Oh, Moira, really.'

'Would you, Jane?'

'Don't look so gloomy.' Jane pushed her plate away and lit a cigarette. 'I'm perfectly all right.'

Moira said quietly, 'I wish I could have been more help to you. I've thought about it so much.' She stared in front of her, frowning. 'Maybe I was wrong. I made a mistake. I wish I'd helped you more.'

'Oh, Moira, you're being silly. Have another drink and eat your supper.'

'No, I don't want any more. It was very nice, though. Jane—can't we really talk?'

'We are talking.'

'You know what I mean. We used to discuss this very problem.'

Jane's face behind the smile became hostile. 'All right. Talk about what?'

'Oh . . .' Moira moved her hands helplessly. 'Everything. Anything. Please don't make it so hard for me.'

'But there's nothing,' said Jane.

Moira sighed.

'Really there isn't. Look—on the phone I've kept you up to date on everything, Hugh and the job and getting this flat. And the first thing I said tonight was about my New Year resolutions.'

Moira was silent. Jane added more emphatically, 'If you mean talk about the past, that's all dead and buried.'

Moira looked at her. She laughed. 'It's no good you looking so disbelieving. I can't live on memories for ever. Anyone can get over anything eventually, can't they? I don't want to talk about it particularly, because it's pointless. It's a long time ago. I want to look ahead. There are lots of people in the same position.' She stood up. 'I'll make some coffee and we can have a lazy evening.' She went into the kitchen. Moira piled the plates on a tray and took them out. 'Oh, thank you,' Jane said. 'Just dump them. I'll do them later.'

'Are you sure? I could help . . .

'Not at all. You do enough at home. They won't take me long.'

Over coffee they listened to some of Jane's new collection of records and smoked a lot of cigarettes. At nine Moira said almost nervously, 'I'd better be going, I suppose.'

'Well, you have to keep on the right side of your mother-in-law, don't you, if she's baby-sitting?'

On the doorstep Moira paused and hugged Jane awkwardly. The freckles stood out on her pale face. 'I'm sorry if I was clumsy,' she said. 'I meant well.'

'Don't be silly,' said Jane. 'It was lovely to see you. You must come again some time.'

HUGH WAS PERSISTENT, but not as persistent as she had feared. In any case it was good practice. At first he was simply incredulous and inclined to mockery, but when, rather suddenly, he believed her, he rapidly became hurt, insulted and withdrawn. He seemed, perhaps for his own pride, to feel that she would regret her decision and come running when it was too late—a mood she contrasted with his earlier humility over his lack of success with women.

Buoyed up for a few days, she worked hard, ate and slept well, saw films. In the evening three days after New Year she carefully looked up the hoarded phone number and telephoned Lisa. The phone was answered almost immediately by a somewhat croaking voice that seemed familiar but as yet unrecognized.

‘Can I speak to Lisa?’

‘She’s not here.’ The croak succeeded in being very expressive. ‘She left months ago.’ It was cross and sorry for itself.

‘Who is that?’ Jane asked with sudden suspicion.

‘This is John Gregory.’

‘Oh, John.’ She was absurdly pleased. It was like meeting some casual acquaintance or even enemy on holiday. ‘This is Jane.’

‘Jane? *Jane* . . .

‘How are you?’

‘Terrible. I’m ill.’ A bout of coughing followed. ‘Why are you phoning Lisa?’

‘Oh . . .’ Why indeed? ‘I don’t know. I just felt like a chat.’ The only friend left who doesn’t pity me.

‘She didn’t ask you to phone . . . to find out about me?’

Jane was honestly amazed. She had forgotten a lot about John during the past year. ‘Good heavens no. I was phoning

to speak to her. I didn't even know you were there.'

A silence followed while he considered this. 'All right. It was just what she might have done, though. How are you, Jane?'

'I'm fine. How are you?' She had to ask again.

'Half-dead,' he said this time. 'I've got this bug. God knows when I'll be on my feet again.'

'I'm sorry,' she said inadequately.

'I think it's flu.'

'Have you had the doctor?'

'Yes, but he just gave me pills and went away. They don't care. If you can't walk into their surgery you might as well die and save them a trip. He thinks I've just got a cold, but you don't feel like this with a cold for God's sake.'

'I *am* sorry, John.'

'You won't hang up, will you?' he said urgently. 'Not yet. Even though I can't produce Lisa.'

'No . . . all right.'

'It does me good to hear a friendly voice. We got together again, you know, eighteen months ago.'

'Yes, I know.'

'She walked out in September. Left me and the flat and all her things. Said I contaminated the place. She wanted a fresh start. Another one. Oh, Christ.' He groaned and sneezed.

'Maybe she'll come back,' Jane attempted.

'She won't. She's crazy. I'm better off without her.'

'Yes.' She tried to sound soothing.

'How about you? You married again or anything?'

'No.'

'Not anything?'

'No.'

'Well.' He pondered. 'You're better off. We're both better off on our own.' A choking sound—a cough, a laugh?—followed. 'Trouble is, it gets so goddam lonely, even when you know you're better off.'

'Oh John, don't.' It was the last thing she wanted to hear. 'Jane.' A real cry for help. She was frightened. 'Jane, don't hang up.'

'I said I wouldn't.'

'Oh, Jane. We've had a bloody raw deal, haven't we?'

She murmured something vague.

'Jane, where are you?'

'In my flat.'

'Where's that?'

'Hampstead.'

'I'm in Bayswater.'

'Yes, I know.'

'What are you doing?'

'Oh . . . nothing much.'

'Could you come over?'

'What?'

'Could you come over?' Impatience rather than humility.

She was taken aback and hardly knew what to say. She hedged briefly. 'What, now?'

'Yes, now.'

'Well, I—'

'Oh, forget it. Why the hell should you? Look, forget I ever asked you.'

'No, it's all right.' She spoke impulsively. 'Of course I'll come.'

'Will you? Will you really?'

'Yes, of course.'

'You're an angel. D'you know how to get here?'

'Well, vaguely.'

He gave her directions, not very clear, in a hoarse voice, and she took them down in shorthand. 'Look,' he finished. 'Bring a bottle of whisky, will you? I'll give you the money. I've run out and it's the only thing that helps. I must hang up now; my head's aching. Don't be long, will you, Jane?'

It was maddening and autocratic but it made her feel purposeful. She put together whisky and cigarettes and oranges to tempt the invalid appetite, and took a taxi

because it seemed appropriate to the insane nature of the trip.

When she reached the flat and knocked, he yelled that the door was open and she let herself into the familiar living-room and sank into the white carpet. The bedroom door was open and John, in green silk pyjamas, lay looking hot and tousled amongst the incredible chaos of a permanently occupied bed.

'I was asleep,' he said reproachfully.

Jane said, 'Well, I had to get in.'

'I left . . . the door open . . . specially.' A new trick, this, of speaking in slow and irregular bursts, as if each group of words was dragged forth, taking with it the last of his strength. She was irritated and yet there was no doubt at all that he really did look ill.

She put the whisky and cigarettes on the bedside table and showed him the oranges. 'I brought you these as well.'

'Oh.' He shut his eyes. 'Vitamin C. Pour me a drink, will you? God, I ache all over. You'll find glasses in there.' He flopped a hand on the bed in the general direction of the living-room.

When she brought the drinks his breathing was heavy and regular, so she sat and sipped at her own glass. His eyes flashed open. 'Ah, there you are.'

'I thought you were asleep,' she said, handing him the glass. He took it and drank, looking at her hard the whole time.

'Jane,' he said thoughtfully.

'That's right.' She was embarrassed. His stare was fixed and unsmiling, like that of a child.

'God, life's funny. I wish I had a sense of humour. We didn't expect this, did we? D'you think we deserve it?'

'John, I only came to nurse you, not to dig up the past.'

He laughed. 'My manners don't improve, do they? No wonder nobody loves me.'

'Don't be silly,' she said stiffly.

'Oh, Jane, what a nanny voice. That's not what I need.'

He put out a hand and grabbed her arm. 'Sit there till I go to sleep. You know what it's like being alone.'

She held his hand. It was very hot. 'It doesn't help to talk about it,' she said.

He was silent for a long time and again she thought he had fallen asleep. She studied the face, its hard angles softened in relaxation. Presently he muttered in a low voice, his eyes still shut, 'You can beat it if you're two.'

'Hush.' It was an uncomfortable, maternal feeling, perhaps to mask something else. She hated the knack he had of stirring memories.

'Don't go,' he murmured once more, and then his eyelids flickered and he was really asleep.

IT WAS LATE when she managed to release her hand and later when she crept out of the flat after tidying up as far as she could. She was very tired. In the morning about ten she telephoned him, but there was no reply and she was sufficiently alarmed to go round immediately. All the doors were unlocked and she found John in bed unconscious, the whisky bottle half-full, and an empty box of sleeping tablets on the floor. She was frightened and shook him, but he was limp and heavy. She considered calling doctors or police but decided first to try shock treatment. Halfway across the bedroom with a spongeful of cold water in her hand, she saw his eyes open.

'You left me.' It was a sulky voice.

'Yes. I had to go home.'

'Why? You could have slept here.'

'I never thought of it.'

He groaned and shut his eyes.

'Well, how are you?'

'I woke up in the night and you weren't there. I asked you to stay.'

'I stayed long after you were asleep.'

'But I woke up again. I never sleep for long. I counted on you being there.'

'I'm sorry.' She really felt guilty. His strength of feeling seemed to cancel out any unreason in his argument.

'That's why I took this stuff.' He drooped an arm at the box.

'You frightened me.'

'Did I? Good.'

She was annoyed. 'Is that why you did it?'

'No.' Extreme contempt. 'I wanted to sleep. I shouldn't have had the whisky, though. You're not supposed to do both.'

'How do you feel now?'

'How do you think I feel?'

'Oh, all right.' She turned away.

'Jane. Don't be angry, Jane. God, my head's splitting. Make me some black coffee, there's an angel. Have you had breakfast?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Well, have some more with me.'

'D'you want to eat?'

'No, just coffee. And one of your oranges.' He reached out a hand for one and began to tear off the skin. His hands looked very strong.

'What are you doing these days?' he asked when she brought in the coffee.

'Oh . . .' She wished he had not asked. 'Shorthand and typing in the afternoons. Are you making a film?'

'No, I'm not.' He watched her closely. 'Go on, ask me if I'm finished.'

'Don't be silly.'

'I haven't made my big film yet either. D'you think I ever will?'

'I don't know.'

'Maybe Dino was right about it. Well, d'you think he was?'

She managed a shrug, avoiding his curious eyes.

'Don't you like me saying his name?'

She made an effort. 'Why should it matter?'

He smiled. 'I wondered. Can you say his name? I couldn't say Lisa's name for months. But I can now.'

Jane put down her cup. 'That bed looks terribly uncomfortable. Why don't you get up and let me remake it?'

'That's a fine idea.' He seemed pleased and heaved himself out. 'I'll have a shower and a shave while you're doing it. I'm not really the dirty pig I look. Not by inclination.'

The bathroom was next door. While she stripped the bed she heard him violently brushing his teeth; then he started running the shower, rather gently. He called to her

above it, 'I still see him, you know. Dino. And Annamaria. Only she's not so keen on me. A very pretty girl, but she doesn't make me feel welcome somehow.'

Jane had paused in her work and the sight of her own face in the mirror, strained and alert, quite frightened her. She told herself severely that John was providing her with a good opportunity to practise her new resolutions.

'Pity,' she called back.

'Yes, it is. Not like you, Jane. Still, you can't have everything, so they say. I've often wondered why that is, haven't you?'

'Yes, often.'

There was only the sound of running water for a while, then: 'The baby's quite nice, as babies go.'

'Good.'

'Pretty little thing. Dino's very keen on her. Quite the besotted father. I always thought he would be. Didn't you?'

That needed special effort. She was alarmed to find how much. 'Yes.' She could, of course, walk out, if she didn't mind admitting to herself as well as to John that she couldn't take it. This is nothing, she thought; merely facts you have known for a long time. When a person has died it must be hard at first, but eventually you can talk about their last illness. So she stayed. She wondered why John should be a tougher proposition than Moira when he had never been close to her.

The bed was ready for him when he came back. 'That looks wonderful,' he said, and sounded genuinely appreciative. She was still not used to his blend of gratitude and brutality.

In the afternoon at work she could not forget him. It was not an emotional feeling but a mixture of duty and fascination. He had not changed at all and he still saw Dino. She returned in the evening and found him sitting up, delighted to see her. He wanted toast and Bovril, which she made for him, and they spent the evening playing cards. It all brought

back too many memories, but she told herself it was healthy, part of the healing process. In Lisa's flat there was no awareness of time and it seemed very much a closed society. Hard to believe that outside there was a real world where normal people lived ordinary lives. Wherever John was, he seemed able to create his own claustrophobic atmosphere.

At ten he was very tired quite suddenly and almost fell asleep before he could lie down. Sleeping, he looked harmless, even innocent. She felt, remembering the morning's reproaches, that it was impossible to leave him again, so after a few drinks and an hour of television she curled up on Lisa's huge, curved settee.

It was very dark when she woke and she was not sure what had woken her. She was stiff from trying to fit the couch and she could not find the switch on the table-lamp.

'Jane.'

'Oh, John. What's the matter?'

'Could you come in here? Don't put on the light.' It was a very forlorn voice.

She went in; the room was utterly dark, presumably through Lisa's choice of curtains. She had the feeling of unreality that always comes with waking in the middle of the night.

'Were you asleep?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry. I was selfish to wake you.'

'It's all right.' Humility was disarming.

'I was afraid you'd gone. I'm so glad you haven't.'

'Can I get you anything?'

'No. Just come and sit by me.'

She groped her way to the edge of the bed and sat on it. He reached for her hand and hung on rather tightly.

'She'll never come back,' he said. 'I know she won't. I'm resigned to it.'

He did not sound at all resigned. Jane said, 'She might. You thought she wouldn't last time.'

'There's a difference. There really is. You've got to believe me.'

'All right.'

'Jane, d'you think there'll ever be anyone else?'

An impossible question. 'Yes, of course.'

'Do you really? There's got to be. Sometimes I think I'll go mad. I needed her so badly. You know?'

'Yes, I know.' Now the darkness was a blessing.

'Are you looking too?'

'I don't know.'

'You must.'

Their voices were very soft and clear in the dark room, very quiet and confidential.

'I don't know what I'm doing.'

'Poor Jane. Do you put on a brave face?'

'I suppose so. Sometimes.'

'I do, too. Or I try to. It doesn't work well, though.'

'No, it doesn't.'

'Jane . . . have you had anyone else?'

She hesitated. 'No.'

'Neither have I. Not since she left. God, it's awful, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'You can admit it to me. We're in the same boat, aren't we?'

'I suppose so.'

'I just lie here and think about it. It's not the same to go out and pick someone up. You have to put on a show. I want someone I know.'

She longed to withdraw her hand, but his grip was tight and it would have meant a struggle.

'Dino hasn't changed, you know.'

Her throat was constricted and she couldn't answer.

'He still makes the most of his chances. Christ, I wish I could be like that. I envy him.'

So he was not even faithful to Annamaria. The Catholic wedding had worked no miracle. It had not even taken very

long. There was the stirring of triumph: I lasted longer, I'm sure I did.

'Jane.' His voice was very low. 'D'you miss it?'

'I try not to think about it.'

'But when you do . . .'

It was very disturbing. She wished he would not go on.

'It must have been good with Dino.'

'It was a long time ago.'

'But you still think about it, don't you? And want it. And get a pain. Don't you?' His voice was urgent and caressing.

For months she had survived, somehow, and now he was cracking her, piece by piece. Even his grip on her hand was looser and yet she did not pull away.

'Jane . . . let me.'

His voice was very soft and she trembled and felt sick at the process he had begun. To have come so far to be defeated was almost unbearable.

'Please, Jane, I want to so much. I feel I'm going mad. You know what it's like. You've felt it too. Please let me.'

She said automatically, 'No,' and knew it was no use.

'Let me kiss you.' He sat up, sliding a hand behind her head. 'Your hair's so long.'

'Leave it alone.'

He dropped his hand to her shoulder, leaned forward and kissed her on the mouth. He tasted of whisky. 'Jane . . .'

'John, this is silly.'

'Just a little help. A friendly gesture. Just have a little pity if you don't feel anything.'

'You know what I feel. You've been so unfair.'

'I want you.'

'Not me, it.' She was angry.

'Does it matter?'

'Of course it matters.'

'We're poor people, Jane. We have to make do. I can't be Dino. But you can always pretend.'

'For Christ's sake, John—'

'Don't you want him back?'

She said with all her strength, 'No.'

'Then it doesn't matter. You're not saving yourself for him. You can afford to be kind, can't you? Let me, Jane, please let me.'

Even the phraseology was perversely exciting because it was all wrong, and because it was accompanied by the right pictures, and because it followed so quickly on the incident with Hugh. Perhaps it would prove something. Perhaps it really was the door to freedom and that was why she was fighting it. Exorcism.

She lay down, so exhausted that she only wanted to cry, the stimulation fading a little. John struggled with her underclothes. 'You'll have to help me,' he said impatiently.

She helped him, not finding it amusing, but hating herself because hunger was rising again.

'I'm not equipped,' she said.

'That's all right. I am.'

She wondered if he had planned it from the beginning.

He did not seem too concerned about making her ready; he himself was quite ready. Because he was an old friend there was something vaguely incestuous about it. Her mind was completely detached and she felt ashamed of her body for beginning to function. It did not get very far. John was excited and in a world of his own as far as her reactions were concerned. She had never experienced someone who not only could not wait for her but apparently was not even going to try. Her mind was a terrible confusion of pictures: of Dino and Hugh and John, of a dark tunnel from which she might emerge free and renewed, of a dreadful certainty that fidelity to Dino would get her nowhere, and an appalling urge to wallow in something she felt quite sure was dirty, but whether to punish Dino or herself she did not know. She was swept along on this mixed tide and dimly in the background her body, hurt at first, began to function in the familiar, forgotten way when suddenly, with a flash of delighted violence from John, it was all over, and he flopped down on her, gasping.

She wanted to kill him first, then shift his carcass and crawl into the bathroom to wash herself. Instead she lay still, biting her lips as the pain grew, and his satisfied sweat ran over her. Quite soon he rolled off her and though she still wanted to get up she just lay there, feeling the tears trickle from the corners of her eyes into her hair. She hated him but she hated herself even more.

‘Cigarette?’ he asked.

She did not trust herself to speak.

‘Jane? Are you asleep? That was terrific.’

She kept quiet and still and presently she was rewarded by his steady breathing. The thought of a post-mortem was the final touch of horror. When she thought she had waited long enough she got up carefully and went into the bathroom. She was sick into the basin and could hardly look at her reflection for shame. She took a cold shower and spent the rest of the night on the couch, too exhausted even to run away.

THE MORNING CAME and had to be faced. She woke early, feeling cold and stiff; got up and dressed and made up her face, wanting all the layers of defence she could get. She hoped to escape from the flat without waking him, but before she was ready a voice called, 'Jane.'

She said, 'Yes,' in a cross, brisk tone.

'Come and say good morning.'

She went in, if only to stop him calling out. He smiled at her, looking pleased and friendly. 'I feel better today.'

'I'm so glad.'

'You don't sound very glad. What's the matter? Sorry you've been a naughty girl?'

That stung. She said sharply, 'No. Just sorry it wasn't more fun.'

'Oh dear.' He clicked his tongue. 'You do sound sour. Just give me time. We can't all be great lovers straight away. You're a bit out of practice yourself.'

'Oh, John.' She was exasperated beyond endurance. 'Is that all you think it is, practice? Don't you understand anything?'

'Yes, quite a lot. D'you want me to tell you how much?'

It made no sense, yet it was sinister: a definite threat. He watched her curiously. 'Why are you all dressed? You don't have to be at work for hours yet.'

She wanted to get out of the room, so she said, 'I'll bring you some coffee.'

'No, don't go. I don't want any yet. I'm afraid you'll go and not come back.'

'Would it matter?'

'Yes, I don't want to be alone.'

She sighed. 'John, this is hopeless. Let me walk out now and we'll forget the whole thing.'

'Why should we? I don't want to, anyway. It was fun.'
'Good.'

'Don't be so bitter. Come over here and give me another chance.'

'Oh, what an alluring invitation.'

'Sarcasm. Now that I haven't heard before. Or is it irony? I get them mixed up, you know. Lisa used to care about these things. It comes from having no education.'

Suddenly she was tired again as if she had not slept at all. 'John, this is silly. You need Lisa, not me. Or somebody else. But certainly not me. We're not doing each other any good. It was all a big mistake.'

He smiled at her. 'And you?' he said. 'Who do you need?'

'Oh, stop playing your little game. It's so silly.'

'Is it? But it bothers you, all the same. Why does it bother you if it's silly?'

'Oh—*because* it's silly.'

'No.' He shook his head. 'That isn't it.'

'I'm going. You're well enough to look after yourself.'

'Come back tonight.' He settled himself more comfortably.

'No, I'm not coming back.'

'Just to talk.'

'No.'

'I'll phone you.'

'I'll be out.'

'Frightened?'

'No.'

'You're frightened.' He smiled.

'God, I see what Lisa meant about you,' said Jane vehemently. 'She had a lucky escape.'

'Dear me. All this fuss because you didn't make it last night.'

'D'you think that's all it is? Don't you even realize how selfish you are? How totally inconsiderate and untalented and stupid and unfair—' She was suddenly crying.

'And unlike Dino.'

‘Will you shut up about Dino.’

‘You said it. Good girl. Now tell me, Jane; I’ve always wanted to know. What’s so special about Dino? What does he do that’s so brilliant?’

‘For Christ’s sake shut up and keep your dirty little mind off him.’

‘I know he’s good, but how good? He never would talk about it, but all his women were bloody hard to please.’

Jane turned and walked through the door, pausing in the living-room to pick up her bag and coat.

‘Well, what’s the matter? You’re divorced, aren’t you? You know he had other women.’

‘You make me sick, John, and I’m going.’

‘All right, don’t let me keep you. But if you run into Lisa you might ask her what she liked best about Dino. She wouldn’t tell me. I suppose it was just too sacred.’

Jane stood motionless and felt as if she were still under the cold shower, fully dressed. There was a whole half-minute of silence.

‘Surprise,’ said John softly.

She turned round, too overcome to act or defend herself.

‘Is that true?’

‘’Fraid so.’

‘Dino and Lisa.’

‘Yes.’

‘But when?’ It was a cry of agony where she had thought no more pain could be felt.

John lit a cigarette. ‘Well, I don’t know when it finished, but the first time was when he went to see her on my behalf. When he was so late home and afterwards you thought it was Annamaria. It’s quite funny really. You never suspected, did you?’

She sat down on a chair and said, ‘No.’ She thought of his innocent, injured manner and the arguments they had had, his many protestations, and the letter Lisa had written. She had known that he told lies, but the lies were more than she knew. It was hardly surprising that John should be amused.

'I don't think it lasted very long,' John added conversationally. 'If that's any comfort.'

She was silent.

'Lisa certainly appreciated it, though. Fancy you never suspecting. Just because we were all friends?'

She nodded.

'That means nothing,' said John.

She wanted to say several things: that it meant a great deal and the very timing of the incident proved it, that he had a short memory if he had forgotten Dino's understanding and patience. But it would have taken more effort than she could spare from hanging on to her feelings and John would probably not have allowed it to reach him. Instead she said, 'You really wanted me to know about this, didn't you?'

'Not at first.' He smiled. 'There was a certain piquancy in your not knowing. But you tempted me to say it.'

She considered this, as far as her dazed mind would allow. 'Was last night a sort of retribution?'

'Oh no. I don't grudge Dino Lisa. My God, why should I? But it seemed such a cosy idea—all in the family, as it were. I rather like following in Dino's tracks.'

'Yes, you have a crush on him, Lisa said.'

'Yes, I admire him enormously. Lisa was jealous, like all women. They hate their men to have friendships. You were a bit jealous, too, but you hid it better than Lisa.'

She felt sure that there was much she could throw back but she was not certain of her facts and she feared that he was too strong for her in any case.

'You want him back,' he said. 'That's why I could talk you down last night. You better be careful, Jane; you're in a bad way.'

She stood on weak legs. 'Well, it's not your affair, fortunately.'

'Pity you divorced him. He couldn't help what he did. He was good at it, that's all. It was a kind of hobby with him. He couldn't resist the chances and he got a lot.'

'You're oversimplifying,' said Jane, 'but it doesn't matter. You can't be expected to know.'

'Oh, you believed all those hard-luck stories. So did Lisa, as a matter of fact. But then she thought she was one herself.'

'Of course, you could be making all this up.'

'Yes. Only I'm not. You know that. You can check with Lisa if you want to.'

Jane drew on her gloves. 'I'm going now, John.'

He held out his hand.

'Oh, don't be a fool.'

'Pity. Can't we part friends?'

'Friends!'

'Don't think too badly of me.'

Jane said, 'I'm sorry. If this is the game you played with Lisa, I'm surprised she stuck it so long. It doesn't appeal to me one bit.'

He lay back limply on his pillows. 'I can't help what I do. Haven't you ever hit something you meant to stroke?'

She opened the door. 'Good-bye, John.'

He called after her as she walked down the passage. 'Dino understood.'

IN MAX'S OFFICE she wondered why she had come. John's story had all the marks of truth and yet there was this compulsion to confirm it. Max was pleased to see her, fussing round her with compliments, but she thought she detected alarm as well, beneath the social front.

'And what can I do to help you?' he asked finally.

'I wondered if you knew who Lisa Fox's agent is now. I've lost touch with her and she's moved flats.'

He hesitated, then said, 'Well, you've come to the right place.'

'You?'

'Me.'

'How funny.'

He produced an address. 'Here's where she lives. She's filming at the moment.'

Jane took a deep breath to steady her voice and asked, 'What's Dino doing?'

Max sighed. He was looking very worried. 'Jane, don't try to keep so close to him.'

'Max, for heaven's sake, I could hardly have been further away for the past year, could I?'

He shook his head distractedly. 'That's not what I mean. You know. What you're doing is unhealthy. You'll hurt yourself. All these old friends. You shouldn't see Lisa and, though I am delighted to see you, you shouldn't be here.'

'Well, thank you.'

'No.' He did not smile. 'It is bad for you. You need a new life.'

She said simply, 'There isn't one, Max.'

'Don't even think like that.' He was horrified. 'It's poison.'

'There really isn't.' She was calm, as one accepting a sentence at last. 'I wouldn't admit it, but it's been proved to me.'

She called on Lisa, not trusting the telephone. On the second evening she was in. She showed surprise but no pleasure. 'Well, well.'

'Can I come in?'

'I suppose so.'

This flat was small and austere furnished, but Lisa's appearance was as trim and glossy as Jane remembered it.

'Drink?' said Lisa stonily.

'No, thank you. I won't keep you long. Do you know why I've come?'

'How could I?'

'I thought you might guess. It's to do with John.'

'Oh, has he killed himself? I hope.'

'No, he's been telling me about you and Dino.'

'Oh.' Lisa lit a cigarette, not offering one to Jane. 'I suppose it was bound to come out some time.'

'Then it's true?'

'That rather depends on what John said. He never was a boy scout exactly. It started the night Dino came to talk me into going back to John. It lasted for a week and it was wonderful.'

'That's all he said.'

'You surprise me. He's the sort of bastard who loves embroidering. Well?'

'Well, what?'

'Is that all you've come about?'

'Yes, that's all.'

'Well, I'm not ashamed. I needed it and it didn't do you any harm. He's a wonderful person.' She made a scornful noise. 'My God, what a fool you are.'

Jane was so bruised already that this hardly seemed an insult. 'Why d'you hate me, Lisa?'

'I don't. I despise you, that's all. And I can't be polite to people I despise. I'm sorry, but there it is. My God, if ever anyone signed their own death warrant, ducky, it was you.'

Jane said, 'Yes. So it seems.'

Lisa regarded her with a blend of curiosity and exasperation. 'But *why* ?'

Jane shook her head. 'You wouldn't understand.'

'You're right there. If you'd ever known what it was like to live on really little . . .' She stubbed out her unfinished cigarette disgustedly. 'I told you not to do it. In that letter.'

'Why did you bother ?'

'Oh, God knows. Because Dino loved you, I suppose, and it all seemed such a waste.'

Jane said, 'If it makes you feel better, it was already too late when you wrote. There are things you don't know.'

Lisa shrugged. 'You should never have left him.'

There was a long pause. Jane ended it. 'Well, I suppose I must be going. How are you, Lisa ?'

'I'm here. And away from John. That's progress of a sort.'

She saw Jane to the door. There she paused with the first sign of embarrassment. 'I'm sorry I was so rude.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Jane.

Mr Lewis met her for lunch from his office. He had been polite but guarded on the phone. On sight she felt all her old affection for him rushing back and she looked painfully for Dino's features in his face.

'It's nice to see you, Jane,' he said. 'How are you ?'

'I'm fine. How are you and Dino's mother ?'

'We're both well.'

They sat in a dark corner of the pub with their sandwiches and beer. It was a safe, discreet place.

Jane said, 'When you came to see me that time, why did you say what you said ?'

He looked at her compassionately. 'I was hoping to shock you into going back. I thought no one had mentioned divorce and you might drift into it without realizing what you were doing.'

'And you didn't want me to.'

'Oh, Dino deserved it all right, but I thought you'd be unhappy if you did.'

'How right you were,' she said. 'You and practically everyone else. It's really very funny.'

'Are you all right?' he asked with concern.

'Yes, of course. How's Annamaria?'

'She's well.' He paused. 'She's expecting another baby.'

'Oh. I expect Dino's mother loves her.'

'Yes, they get on very well.'

'Do you like her?'

He looked thoughtful. 'She's very pleasant, but I hardly know her. I was very upset by your divorce, Jane, and it's taken me a while to readjust. Nobody thinks of the parents' angle on these things, but it's there.'

Jane said softly, 'Are they happy?'

'Yes, I think so. Is that the wrong answer?'

'No.'

'I wish I could help you, Jane. I really do. I'm still very fond of you.'

'I know. You have helped me. What's Dino doing at the moment?'

'He's got a play coming up.' He told her where and when.

'Is he worried about it?'

'Yes, he is rather.'

'He would be.'

She went home and thought. It was like admitting cancer, inoperable. Her behaviour had been reasonable for someone else in her position but not for her. She was not able to replant her roots and to most people this had been obvious. For others a new life could be found; the break could be clean. But for her the growth was too deep.

As she went to the people who had loved him she grew warmer, stronger. Even that much contact revived her and confirmed her path. She had wept and hesitated long enough.

SHE WAITED. IT was very peaceful and invigorating. She didn't mind that the time passed slowly; to know where she was going was such infinite relief. Somewhere, no doubt, there was another life and another person, perhaps any number of both, but she knew now that she did not want to find them, and lacked the stamina to search. It seemed so clear that she marvelled gently at herself for ever thinking otherwise.

She bought a ticket for the second night. In the morning she read the notices. They were good but not glowing. In the evening she dressed very carefully, in an old dress she had had cleaned specially for this purpose, and took out the scent she had never managed to throw away. She did her own hair very simply, feeling that no one else's hands could prepare her for this occasion, and kept her make-up to an effective minimum.

She felt nervous and sick for him before the play began, and even more for herself. It was so long since she had seen him except on the screen. But it was easy. The curtain went up and he was there, lying on his bunk in the prison hut with the others, and the rightness of seeing him again made the past separation only seem unnatural. He played an Italian soldier, a coward who managed to rise to an heroic death for the other prisoners. It was a distressing play and, had she been able to give it her attention, it would have upset her. Dino was one of three main characters. There were no women in the play at all but a lot of talk about them. Scenes involving the guards were brutal and when Dino was punished she could not look.

Afterwards she had a long time to wait within sight of the stage door. She had planned it all. If Annamaria was with him or came to meet him she would simply go away and

come back the next night, and the next, as long as she had to. But he was alone. He was among the first of the cast to leave. There were a few people waiting for autographs, but she did not resent them. She had wasted so much time already.

As he walked away from them she stepped forward. She had the advantage of him in that she had had time to prepare and adjust, and the time elapsing since he came through the stage door meant that the beating of her heart was no longer actually painful.

The little crowd was busy with the other actors. He walked a few paces, saw her and stood still. They looked at each other.

She had meant to speak first, had savoured the luxury of saying his name to him, but to see him so close to her made speech for a moment impossible. He said, 'Jane', in a tone of wonder, and the shock was as great as if she had not been hearing his voice all evening. She could not speak, so she just went on looking at him. She could not hear any traffic in London at all.

'Are you cold?' he asked. 'Have you been waiting long?'

She shook her head. His expression was not clearly visible, but the voice was gentle. She had prepared all kinds of clever, casual words but instead she just said, 'Oh, Dino,' and held out her hands.

He took them in both his own and she shook from head to foot. 'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'I was out front.'

'Did you like it?'

'Yes.'

'You're cold; you're shivering.'

'No.'

There was a long pause and he let go of her hands. He sighed. 'Oh Jane, why did you come?'

'Are you angry?'

He shook his head very sadly.

'I wanted to see you.'

Again there was a pause while they looked at each other. 'Why?' he asked eventually.

Then contrary to all her plans she said quite simply, 'Because I love you.'

It was a long moment before he held out his arms and she rushed into them. It would, she thought, have been a good time to die, while she was happy and could still save him a lot of trouble.

'Come to the car,' he said at last. 'You'll be warmer.' He kept an arm round her shoulders until they got there, but once inside they sat apart and she did not know what to do.

'How are you?' he asked, offering her a cigarette.

'All right.' She touched his hand as he lighted it, but there was no response. 'How are you?'

'I'm all right too.'

Desperation made her brave and she said, 'Did I embarrass you just now?'

'No.'

'I meant what I said. I don't want to embarrass you or be a nuisance. I know you've got Annamaria and the baby. I hope you're happy. But I'm so lonely. I've been fighting it—I have tried, honestly. But it isn't any good. I've got nothing, Dino.'

He said helplessly, 'I'm sorry.'

'You never telephoned or anything.'

'No. Should I have done?'

'I wish you had.'

'I thought it would be upsetting.'

'Oh, you were right. But it's better than being dead, you see. I can't make another life. I've tried.'

'Jane, I don't know what to say to you. I hoped so much you were all right.'

She said eagerly, 'Then you did think about me sometimes?'

'Of course I did. What did you expect?'

'I tried everything. I thought I was going to be so tough.'

But I couldn't manage it at all. Are you very angry with me ?'

'No, of course I'm not angry.'

'You seem so far away.'

'I'm sorry, Jane. But I'm trying to think.'

'How to get away from me ?'

'No. Please don't say those things.'

'Are you happy with her, Dino ?'

'Yes.'

'Please—don't be angry with me for questions. Only it's been so long and I've wondered. You do love her now ?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Oh, it's all right. Don't mind saying it. It's only what I expected. And you have a lovely baby.'

'Yes.'

'I'm glad for you, I really am. You ought to be happy. And your mother must be happy too, now you're properly married and have a child and everything.'

'Don't, Jane.'

'Oh, Dino, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be awful.'

'It's not that. But you're hurting yourself and hurting me.'

'You ?'

'Yes. Is that so surprising ? How can I see you unhappy and feel nothing ?'

She said in a low voice, 'I'm frightened you'll send me away. If I could just see you sometimes it would be enough. I can't face not seeing you again.'

He said as if to himself, 'I never expected this.'

'Dino, I just want to see you sometimes. Don't send me away. I've tried so hard and it's no good. There's nothing else at all. Am I being very unfair ?'

'Yes, you're being unfair.'

'I wish you didn't sound so far away.'

He faced her, tender, unsmiling, hurt. 'Jane, there's no future. You need more than this.'

'I only need you.'

'But I can't give you enough.'

'I can manage on very little. Don't you feel anything at all?'

'Yes, of course.' He sounded angry. 'But I am so divided now, so committed.'

'I know all that.'

'It can't be the same. It can't be a quarter of it. What use will it be? You'll be more unhappy. We both will be. Jane, I am so involved—'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Oh, Jane.'

'Dino, don't feel anything. Just let me see you sometimes. That's all I need.'

He moved his hands distractedly. 'Jane—oh, Jane, we were married. How can you settle for so little? It can't work; it's not fair to anyone.'

'Please, Dino.'

'But you can't go from marriage to . . . this.'

'You're forgetting,' she said quietly. 'I've had nothing for a long time. I don't need much to live on. I love you, Dino. Anything is better than not seeing you.' She paused. 'Will you?'

He said, accepting the sentence, 'You know I will.'

50

THEY LAY ON her bed. She had not drawn the curtains and there was a glimpse of frosty moonlight. She said, 'I expect you know how wonderful that was.'

'Yes.'

She had cried with gratitude and the sense of luxury that after all this time he could again be a part of her body. It seemed too much of a miracle and made the physical

pleasure, though keen, almost unimportant. She could hold him in her arms and for a while she was united with him.

She said, 'I've been so lonely. It's awful to sleep alone.'

'I know.' He held her very close and stroked her hair.

'Dino, I was such a fool.'

'Hush.'

She had remembered his tenderness and yet it was more than she remembered.

'Can I say anything? You won't be angry?'

'Say it.'

'I had a night with John. It was so horrible.' She trembled.

'With John? Oh darling, why John?'

Did he feel any jealousy? She must not hope or ask.

'He kept talking about you. I wasn't going to tell you. I rang up Lisa's flat and he was there alone. He had flu and he asked me round to nurse him. In the middle of the night he talked and talked about you and being frustrated and kept on at me. It was horrible. I felt so sick and dirty. It was a terrible mistake.'

'Oh, Janey.' He rocked her gently.

'Afterwards we had a row. I hated him and we were rude to each other and he told me about you and Lisa.'

She felt Dino's arm stiffen. 'Yes, he would. I'm sorry.'

'It doesn't matter. It was a shock, but it doesn't matter at all. I went to see her, actually. I don't know why. I knew John was telling the truth but I still had to ask her. She could hardly bear to speak to me, she thinks I'm such a fool. She's right, too. I am.'

He kissed her and said, 'Don't talk like that.'

'Oh Dino, I went out with such an awful person for months. He was so boring. Eventually he made a pass and I dropped him. He was the solicitor's nephew.' She laughed. 'There's such a lot to tell you and yet there isn't very much.'

There was all the past to remember. Would it help? If she let fall pieces of their shared life would it bring him closer or would she drive away his kindness? How near could she keep him through sheer need?

‘Darling,’ Dino said, ‘I’ll have to be going.’

He had telephoned and lied already. Now she must watch him dress to return to his wife. Annamaria had become a phantom self to whom she must relinquish him. She could see it all now from the other side, but this could not be said to him.

She made him coffee and they drank it together. She knew the full extent of her treachery. He had never before embarked on a more than casual relationship outside his marriage and she had deliberately imposed it on him, using all the weight of the past and her knowledge of him.

‘When am I going to see you?’ she asked.

He hid his anxiety as she presumed he must have hidden his guilt from the others, not sharing the burden. ‘While the play’s on, I think probably Thursdays are best. I have a matinée at two-thirty and the evening show at eight. I’ll come round in between.’

‘That’s perfect.’ Her job must go, of course. ‘And when the play finishes?’

‘I don’t know. It depends on what I’m doing.’

She was hot with fear. ‘You won’t just drop me?’

He looked at her and she wanted to die because this person, this face and voice and these hands had once belonged to her completely and now did not. ‘No, of course I won’t.’

At the door she stopped him, saying, ‘Let me touch you,’ and ran her fingers over his forehead, his eyebrows, his lips. There were so many things she had not dared to say yet and perhaps she never would.

He said gently, ‘I must go, Janey,’ and she let him pass through the door. Standing on the steps, she waved. ‘See you on Thursday,’ she said.

